Games / Anime / Multimedia

Ties That Bind: A look at the games that influenced a generation

play®

Shadow Complex

The evolution of the side-scroller comes to XBLA

July 2009

$5.99US

07

0 71486 03836 8

BUILD'n RACE

Create An Infinite Number of Racetracks Using Over 1,000 Unique Road Segments, Loops, Jumps and More

Race Again & Again On Over 80 Pre-Built Courses or Any of Your Custom Tracks

IN STORES EVERYWHERE THIS JULY

Wii and the Wii logo are trademarks of Nintendo. © 2006 Nintendo

©2006 Icon Games Entertainment Ltd. Build'n Race is a trademark of Icon Games Entertainment in the UK and other countries. All rights reserved.

Wii ZOO ICON GAMES ENTERTAINMENT

EVERYONE ENFANTS ET ADULTES™
E
Alcohol Reference
Mention d'alcool
ESRB CONTENT RATING
CLASSIFIÉ PAR L'ESRB
www.esrb.org

Letter from the Editor

E3 dreaming...

There is no mystery: I love making lists. There is immense pleasure in Top 10s and Best Of The Years and, the mother of all sketchy lists, The Best of E3s. Next month we will get all definitive on your ass and talk about all the top stuff we saw at E3 2009 that will define the rest of the year, but until then, I simply can't wait to get at least some sort of list going before heading into the show.

As I write this, the 15th annual Electronic Entertainment Expo has yet to begin, so in the spirit of *Stark Trek* (a good movie on all fronts: go see it, and sorry for the mild spoiler), let's pretend I screwed with the fabric of time and somehow created an E3 that went according to my devious plans:

1) The lines to the PSN, XBLA and WiiWare rooms were packed so full of anxious gamers that they had to call in security to contain the rabid excitement. It got to a point that no one even cared about those big Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 games as the screaming mobs began to demand more, more, more indie spirit!

2) The copious press conferences ended up being canceled due to threats of insincerity. Those crazy indie people went nuts, getting the place so worked up that no one could comfortably set foot in some stuffy auditorium where executives said stuff and people were forced to write notes about stuff that was inevitable fluff.

3) The Wii had a great showing. The most fickle of the hardcore gamers actually gave Nintendo a thumbs-up for effort. No one wanted to admit it, but the Wii is actually offering some really great gaming experiences. And WiiWare, wouldn't you know it, offered glimpses of classic Nintendo.

4) Heavy Rain and the next Team ICO game battled for Game of the Show before the show even began. But then Beyond Good and Evil 2 stepped up and made the idea of a game of the show even more of a crapshoot. In the end strange justice won and a surprise indie game made everyone forget about sequels and hype. Those 2D Boy guys, creators of World of Goo, revealed their newest game to overwhelming cheers.

5) Someone said, "Hey, we loved Super Metroid, we loved Symphony of the Night, let's make a game that borrows heavily from those greats." A modern XBLA game was then born, called Shadow Complex, debuting at E3 2009.

I know No. 5 to be true for real, because Play had the opportunity to get a detailed look at Shadow Complex for our cover story, beginning on page 40.

Shadow Complex is being made by Chair Entertainment, a small, tight group of gamemakers who demonstrated their skills on the oceanic shooter Undertow a couple years ago, and now are set to release the game they've always wanted to explore.

This is the first time we've ever done a cover story on a downloadable game. Or indie game, if you prefer that curious descriptor. Games like Shadow Complex are what

"...screaming mobs began to demand more, more, more indie spirit!"

I'm personally most excited about these days—games that have a little more leeway with their ideas and a more focused structure.

I can't wait for the next wave of monster titles to come roaring our way this fall, but it's important to make room for the games that may shape this industry in ways that will surprise you.

It makes you think about how games used to be, perhaps how they have partially lost their way. Games are a fickle medium, in which the past is often discarded and disregarded while we constantly evolve into the next wave of technology and ideas. In the spirit of a little oldschool, take a personalized trip down memory lane in our Ties that Bind feature, beginning on page 22.

Happy Independence day! Till next month...

—Brady Fiechter

play magazine staff

Editorial

Publisher **Dave Halverson**
Editor in Chief **Brady Fiechter**
Executive Editor **Heather Anne Campbell**
Associate Editors **Eric L. Patterson, Casey Loe, Greg Orlando, Matt Cabral**
Associate Anime Editor **Bill Gray**
PC Editor **Mike Griffin**
Japanese Correspondents **Nick Des Barres, Dai Kohama**
Contributing Editors **Evan Shamoon, Paul Gaita, Steve Haske, Todd Gilchrist, Eric-Jon Rossel Waugh, Douglass C. Perry**
Copy Editor **Bill Gray**

Cover (Shadow Complex)
Illustration: **Rob Duenas**
Color: **Diego Rodriguez**

Design

Art Director **Michael Hobbs**
Associate Art Director **Chin "Nelson" Lui**
Chief Illustrator **Robert Duenas**

Advertising and Sales

Director of Advertising & Promotions
Bethany Bell
bethany.bell@fusionpublishing.net
818.470.3754
Account Manager
Daniel Marsowicz
818.857.8119
daniel.marsowicz@fusionpublishing.net
Executive Director, Integrated Marketing
Shawn Sanders
shawn.sanders@fusionpublishing.net

play magazine online

Online Content Manager
Eric L. Patterson
webmaster@fusionpublishing.net

Corporate

Director Of Operations
Julie Halverson
julie.halverson@fusionpublishing.net
818.707.7786 x 104
Advertising and Marketing Coordinator
Daniel Campisi
daniel.campisi@fusionpublishing.net
818.707.7786 x 106

Office Manager
Nancy Burns
nancy.burns@fusionpublishing.net
818.707.7786 x 109

Subscriptions and Customer Service
(in U.S.) 800-694-6506
(outside U.S.) 818-487-2036
email: play@pubservice.com

play magazine Offices
Fusion Publishing, Inc.
29219 Canwood St., Suite 100
Agoura Hills, Ca 91301
Tel 818.707.7786 Fax 818.707.7212

Legal Mumbo Jumbo

PLAY™ (ISSN 1537-7539) is published monthly by Fusion Publishing, Inc., 29219 Canwood St., Suite 100, Agoura Hills, CA 91301. Volume 8, Issue 5. Single issue rates: $5.99, yearly newsstand value: $71.88. The one year (12 issue) subscription rate is $19.99 in the U.S., $44.99 in Canada, and $64.99 in all other foreign locales. Checks must be made payable in U.S. currency only to PLAY. Send address changes to: P.O. BOX 16567, North Hollywood, CA 91615-9684 or email play@espcomp.com For subscription service questions, call (800)694-6506. We periodically make lists of our customers available to mailers of goods and services that may interest you. If you do not wish to receive such mailings, please write to us and include a copy of your mailing label. Please allow 6-8 weeks before receiving your first issue, as well as for any subscription changes to take place on any existing subscription. The editors and the publisher are not responsible for unsolicited materials; all unsolicited material becomes the property of Fusion Publishing, Inc. Without limiting the rights of copyrights reserved herein, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in, or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written notice of Fusion publishing, Inc. To reuse any material in this publication, obtain a permission request form by contacting Fusion Publishing, Inc. at (818)707-7786 [phone] or (818)707-7212 [fax]. © Fusion Publishing, Inc. All Rights Reserved, Play™, Fusion Publishing™, Play: Girls of Gaming™, Play: The Calendar™, Fusion Publishing Presents™ are trademarks and copyrights of Fusion Publishing, Inc.™ and © for all other products and the characters contained therein are owned by the respective trademark and copyright owners. All materials listed in this magazine are subject to manufacturers change and the publisher assumes no responsibility for such changes.

Canada Post Publication Mail Agreement 41464579 , undeliverables
2-7496 Bath Road, Mississauga,Ontario L4T 1L2

You will not Rescue the Princess or Battle Brave Knights or Slay the Dragon...

You're The King.

You've got people to do stuff like that for you.

Little King's Story

Your royal charisma (and a magic crown) allows you to command the subjects of your kingdom without getting your hands dirty.

Build and destroy things

Conquer neighboring kingdoms

Battle fearsome enemies

PRE-ORDER NOW!

Onii squishable soft figurine

FREE with pre-order at:

amazon.com

EB GAMES www.ebgames.ca

GameStop power to the players

game crazy

Pre-order now to secure yours. Only while quantities last.

Wii™

TEEN T Crude Humor Mild Cartoon Violence Suggestive Themes Use of Alcohol

CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

www.littlekingsstory.com

XSEED GAMES JKS

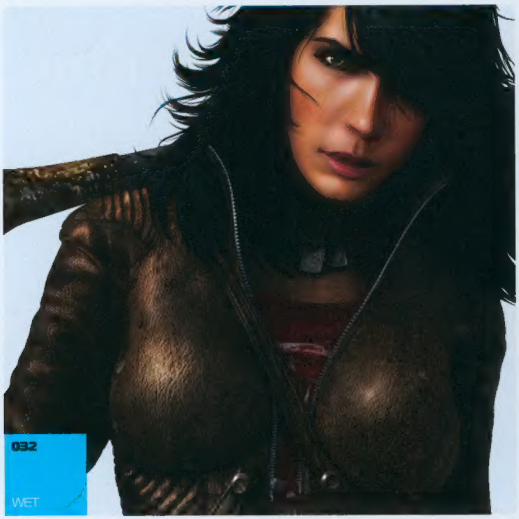
www.xseedgames.com

Marvelous Entertainment USA, Inc.

© 2009 Marvelous Entertainment Inc. All Rights Reserved. Licensed to and published by XSEED Games. Wii and the Wii logo are trademarks of Nintendo. © 2006 Nintendo. The ratings icon is a registered trademark of the Entertainment Software Association.

contents

July 2009



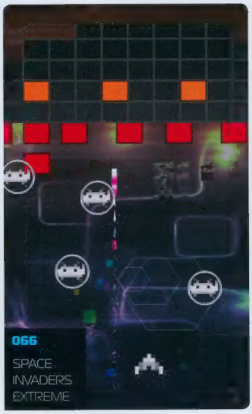
032 WET

040 SHADOW COMPLEX

004 EDITORIAL
006 INK
012 DATABASE
014 IPHONE GAMING
017 ROMEO CHECK FAIL
018 GAMING CULTURE
020 DEVELOPER SOUNDOFF
022 FEATURE: TIES THAT BIND
032 COVER STORY: WET
040 COVER STORY: SHADOW COMPLEX
048 BIOSHOCK 2
050 BATTLEFIELD
051 SABOTEUR
045 DONKEY KONG
052 DARKSIDERS
056 REVIEWS OPENER
057 RED FACTION
058 LITTLE KING STORY
060 GHOSTBUSTERS
062 DAMNATION
064 FUEL
066 SPACE INVADERS
068 CROSS EDGE
070 MOBILE
074 PC
081 ANIME
084 MEDIA
086 SHOP
088 BACK OF THE BOOK

058 LITTLE KING'S STORY

060 GHOST-BUSTERS



066 SPACE INVADERS EXTREME

COMING THIS SUMMER!

HUDSON

MILITARY MADNESS

NECTARIS

[THE MILITARY IS BACK AND MADDER THAN EVER!]

www.MilitaryMadnessGame.com

4-PLAYER ONLINE MULTIPLAYER

DEEP TURN-BASED STRATEGY

CUSTOMIZE THE NEW COMMANDER UNIT

Screenshots shown from the Xbox LIVE® Arcade version

EVERYONE 10+

MILD FANTASY VIOLENCE

ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

XBOX LIVE arcade

PlayStation Network

WiiWare

© 2009 HUDSON SOFT Hudson Entertainment. HUDSON SOFT, and their respective logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Hudson Soft. "NECTARIS" is a registered trademark of HUDSON SOFT. Microsoft, Xbox, Xbox 360, Xbox Live, and Xbox logos are trademarks of Microsoft group of companies and are used under license from Microsoft. Nintendo trademarks used under license. WiiWare is available only through the Wii console. The PlayStation Network Logo is a service mark of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. Online access requires broadband Internet service and a wireless access point or LAN. Certain limitations apply to Wi-Fi connectivity. User is responsible for Internet service fees. All other trademarks are the property of their respective companies. Published by Hudson Entertainment, Inc.

ink

news | trends | gossip | assorted nonsense

Cave Story Shirts

Wear with pride

Cave Story is set to explode on the Wii... sometime this year. When it does, gamers will look back on the launch like Mortal Monday, Sonic 2uesday, or 9/9/99, the day the Dreamcast hit store shelves. Cave Story on Wii: It's going to be a singular moment in game history.

Alright, so maybe it won't mean a realigning of the planet, but Cave Story is still going to be awesome. So the question must be asked: When the game does finally come to WiiWare, what will we wear?

A collaboration between Nicalis, Attract Mode, and artists James Harvey and Mitch "Spacesick" Ansara has given us an answer. Cave Story T-Shirts. Attract Mode's slick online shop (http://attractmo.de/) will be the place to pick them up, whenever the final designs are officially O-K-ed by Pixel. Until then, check out these pieces in progress!

Capcom Committed to the iPhone

While Konami was one of the first major game companies to toss their hat into the iPhone game ring with mobile versions of *Silent Hill* and *Metal Gear Solid*, Capcom announced at Reuters Global Technology Summit their plan to release at least 10 iPhone and iPod Touch games over the next year. Earlier this year, at the MI6 Conference, the iPhone App Store was cited as one of the "greatest video gaming marketing opportunities." With a shrinking Eastern market, Capcom is looking to expand to the platform where consumers buy more games than any other, and currently Apple has just the console.

An 8-bit Tribute to Miles Davis

What happens when someone's love for classic jazz and chiptunes collide? *Kind of Bloop*, a chiptunes recreation of the classic Miles Davis' album *Kind of Blue*. Andy Baio, creator of Upcoming.org, collaborated with chiptunes artists to bring his vision to life through Kickstarter.com. Within four hours of the project's announcement, it was 100% funded and will be released later this year in conjunction with the original album's 50th Anniversary.

PlayFirst

HUDSON

DINER DASH®

COMING THIS SUMMER!

8-PERSON ONLINE MULTIPLAYER

CONSOLE CONTROL

FLO CONTROL!

CO-OP MULTIPLAYER

TEAM DASH!

VS. MULTIPLAYER

TIP WARS!

EVERYONE
E
Use of Alcohol
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

Wii Ware

XBOX LIVE arcade

PlayStation Network

Nintendo trademarks used under license. WiiWare is available only through the Wii console. Microsoft, Xbox, Xbox 360, and Xbox LIVE are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Microsoft Corporation in the U.S. and/or other countries. PlayStation Network Logo is a service mark of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. PlayFirst, Diner Dash, Flo, and all related titles, logos, and characters are trademarks of PlayFirst, Inc. PlayFirst and Diner Dash are registered in the U.S. and other countries.

Gaming Gone By
File #005

words Eric L. Patterson

Hot Coffee Scalds GTA

2005

Ah, hot coffee; once simply two words used for an enjoyable beverage, but now a reference to a legendary event in the discussion of video game sex and ratings.

Released first in October 2004 for Sony's PlayStation 2, Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas was the latest and greatest chapter in Rockstar's GTA series, promising to give players a new world larger in scope and possibility than any of the franchise chapters that had come before it. One of the new activities players could take part in was the ability to have virtual girlfriends, and if things went well enough between the two of you, it could lead to a little off-screen lovin' with your favorite lady.

Except that, in June 2005, some plucky gamers found a way to modify the PC version of San Andreas to bring about a slightly different version of that scene, where instead of everything being nothing more than sounds or implied events, you were actually given control of the game's star, CJ, as he shows his gal a good time. Rockstar Games initially claimed that the minigame was an add-on some dubious person somewhere had created, but when the "Hot Coffee" content was then also found in the PS2 and Xbox versions of the game, it became clear that this hidden option was instead something possibly planned for the game but never actually used.

As is expected whenever the topic of sex and video games comes up, people in the media and politics went absolutely nuts, believing that the ability to have sex being hidden away in San Andreas was totally ridiculous; never mind that if one was honest with themselves, the minigame was pretty crude tech-wise and quite tame outside of the actual subject manner, as well as the fact that you had to specifically put out the effort to get to the minigame in the first place.

So, in July 2005, the ESRB brought the hammer down on Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, changing its rating from "Mature" to "Adults Only 18+", resulting in some retailers having to use stickers to re-label all copies existing in their stock, while others simply pulled the game outright. Rockstar discontinued manufacturing that version of San Andreas, and quickly got to work on a new version of the game that had the Hot Coffee content completely removed for re-release later in the year. (Meanwhile, the PC version received a patch that removed the ability to mod the game in order to grant access to the minigame.)

Many in the gaming community hoped that the "Hot Coffee" events would help to bring about better dialog about the inclusion of sex in video games, especially when comparing what movies and television are allowed to get away with far less scrutiny. Given the panic some had over Mass Effect's attempt to include a maturely-handled sex scene, however, it seems we may still have a long way to go.

"In July 2005, the ESRB brought the hammer down on GTA: San Andreas, changing its rating from 'Mature' to 'Adults Only 18+.'"

BiTS

Resident Evil 5 hits 5 million sold

Media analysis group Screen Digest claims advertising inside games will hit the $1 billion mark by 2014

Epic Games founder Tim Sweeney tells Gamasutra we have a good 10-15 years before true realism in games

If you can't find a good dealer, head to your local Gamestop instead: another addiction study, this one brought to you by the University of Sydney, revealed one in twelve gamers addicted to their hobby, many playing more than 4 hours a day

Speaking of Australia, the DS breaks a record there, reaching 2 million units sold faster than any hardware before it

Microsoft claims the Xbox 360 has jumped past the 30 million mark in unit sales worldwide and grabbed 20 million Live users. No word yet on how many of those units are officially no longer working.

Are the exciting rumors about ICO2 and Beyond Good and Evil 2 true?

The Wii hits 50 million units sold; put that in context, no other system has achieved such a quick sales pace.

August 24 marks the release of all three Metroid Primes on one disc; expect half the Play editors to complain about the new control scheme

Movie producer Dan Lin tells About.com that a Tomb Raider film is on the way that is "a very character-oriented story. I would say more realistic than the past Lara Croft movies."

Wal-mart begins dabbling in the used game buyback market, testing kiosks that give you store credit when you drop in your old software.

Square-Enix puts a cease and desist ending to an almost-completed fan-made sequel to Chrono Trigger, called Crimson Echoes.

Funimation Contest

Play Magazine and Funimation have teamed up to give away five copies of the studio's upcoming Heroic Age: Part 2 DVD, on sale June 30, 2009. In addition to the DVD offer, you'll also have a chance to win one of five Heroic Age posters, signed by various members of the cast. To enter, head on over to www.playmagazine.com by July 13 and... good luck!

A Boy Will be the Salvation of Man

Long ago, the advanced Tribe of Gold vanished from the vast universe. In the void left by their departure, the tyrannical Tribe of Silver ascended to rule, forcing mankind – the Tribe of Iron – to the brink of extinction.

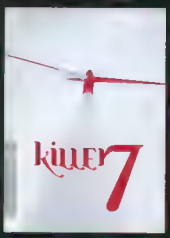
As the conflict escalates, a feral boy named Age labors for humanity's freedom, wielding the ferocious power of the Tribe of Hero against other beings who share his mystical strength. With the enemy closing in, Princess Dhaneila searches for the key to unlock the secrets of the Tribe of Gold before destruction claims the entire cosmos.

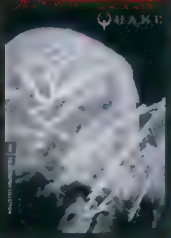
www.funimation.com/heroicage

Gaming's Criterion Collection

The classics. The old guard. The stout captains of gaming. Isn't it time they got the respect they deserve? Isn't it time for a Criterion Collection of gaming? Online forum Select Button is not the first to design covers for a Criterion-style re-release, but their recent thread on a proposed Criterion Collection of Gaming featured some supremely stylish suggestions. What would a master collection of re-released games look like? And would gaming gain a little respect if it presented itself a little more respectably? *HAC*

For more from this collection, visit the difficult to type link: http://www.flickr.com/photos/cossix/sets/72157616881489491/





A Leisurely Read

Well Played 1.0: Video Game, Value and Meaning is a new book of 22 essays by developers, scholars, reviewers and bloggers on many of the best games to grace a console, edited by Carnegie Mellon University professor Drew Davidson. The focus of the essays are to take a deeper and more refined look at games, and to contemplate what it means to really participate in the experience of gaming. Some of the games written about include: *Advance Wars*, *Bioshock*, *Guitar Hero*, *Kingdom of Loathing*, *Shadow of the Colossus*, *Silent Hill 2*, *Super Mario Bros.*, *Tempest*, and *Zork*.

SNKP Makes a Fool of April

The videogame industry is hardly immune from April Fools jokes, but this time the joke's on us. This year SNKP thought it would be funny to create a website for an "unreleased" 8-bit shooter titled *Star Radish*. After a recent announcement on the DokiMajo Plus Weblog, *Star Radish* is now going to be included in the upcoming Japanese release of *DokiMajo Plus* (the third game in the mildly lewd witch investigation series)

Ninokuni

Level 5 is one of the most revered RPG developers in the world. Studio Ghibli is perhaps the best animation company on the planet, inspiring Pixar and Disney alike. So when these two collaborate, we listen.

The story is simple, but sad. Oliver, a child of Hotroit City, has just lost his mother. Her passing was sudden, unexpected. When the grief-stricken boy is approached by the fairy Shizuku with a magical book, he enters a parallel world with the hope that he can bring his mother back to life.

Ninokuni is the tenth anniversary project of Level 5, and to make sure the project was special, they enlisted Ghibli's A-Team of animators to bring the RPG to life. After wrapping production on Ponyo (due in US theaters this summer), the team began work on the Level 5's opus. With five plus minutes of theatrical-quality cutscenes, Ghibli is putting aside their legendary hatred of video-games to give the story some soul. We can't wait.

J-List Theater

003: Love Blossoms

© J-List, www.jlist.com, Dan Kim

www.jlist.com
(all products including games, must be 18 to view)
www.jbox.com
(anime, toy, figure, snack, and other products)

playback

letters@playmagazine.com

"I enjoy bloody mindless killing just as much as the next person, guy or girl."

Wanted to send a quick hello to the staff...and comment on how much I appreciate that you guys take such a personal approach in your writing. As a 40-something dude, married and a proud father, you start to see life through a different lens. I'm getting tired of all the criticism that goes on, not just in games but media in general, where people come off as if their opinion is scripture. You guys make it a point to express personal enthusiasm without pretending like you are some holy experts who can't be debated. Anyways, I guess my point is that I'm tired of game discussion devolving into attacks... Who has the time to play even half of what's out there, heck, even 10 percent? Games are becoming more about picky taste than anything else. The "good" games, are they really that much better than the "bad" games?

Grant

I like a little more to my games. I like the characters to have a purpose and a personality, not just some meat-head running around with a gun, or escorting the princess (or summoner Yuna, whichever you prefer) to their next location until finally the torture is over. I like my games intense all the way through. I want a good reason to go into that base and slaughter everybody. Next gen has not impressed me so far. Graphics do not make a game.

And before I end my small rant, I'd like to say one more thing. I'm sick of hearing all about how game companies should cater more to girls and make more girly games. What is that? I enjoy bloody mindless killing just as much as the next person, guy or girl. Bring on the blood, zombies, aliens anything! I don't put a thought into whether Ivy has clothes on or if you can see Taki's nipples through her red spandex. Action, big weapons, blood, sex bring it on (I loved how you could shoot everything in the Godfather, I myself am quite partial to shooting hookers in the kneecaps). Girls don't need special treatment. We can play games just as well as boys. Our thumbs are just as capable of pushing buttons. It's all about personal preference.

We're out there, you just have to know where to look. I rest my case.

Liz M

This is in response to your article "I Demand a Recount." I believe there's a very good scientific reason why you and others get pleasure from difficult games which I explain in an upcoming article in "Intelligent Gamer." http://www.intelligentgamer.com/e107_plugins/content/content.php?cat.5

The text of this article is immediately below.

If you're a gamer, and I assume you are if you're reading this piece, you might have wondered at some point why games can be so addicting. Why do we willingly give ourselves Herculean puzzles and adventures when we could just as well be sitting in a bar sipping a cold one and making eyes at that gorgeous thing across the room? What possible drive could we be satisfying that would keep us glued to a keyboard and a video screen until the wee hours of the night?

To understand that, we have to understand what neurobiologists call the pleasure instinct, which is evolution's tool for giving us behavior that maximize our reproductive success. Once this is understood it becomes more or less obvious that we must enjoy a high input data rate because it triggers our instinct to survive through learning. If we did not have this instinct then our natural instinct for conserving energy would have wiped out our species a long time ago.

We can see how this applies to games. Games play right into evolution's need to drive us to learn and understand. A good game encourages learning, fast responses, and quick decision making and we're rewarded by the pleasure instinct.

Best,
Henry Harris

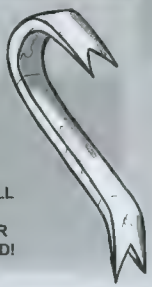
COPYRIGHT © 2009 PHILLIP M JACKSON PMJ

UNUSED GAME PROMOTIONS

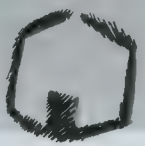
HALF-LIFE
APOCALYPSE-INDUCING-PHYSICIST PLAYSET.

INCLUDES:

JUNIOR SIZED RUBBER CROWBAR
THE ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR BLUDGEONING SMALL ANIMALS TO DEATH, BE THEY FROM XEN OR YOUR NEIGHBOURS' BACK YARD!



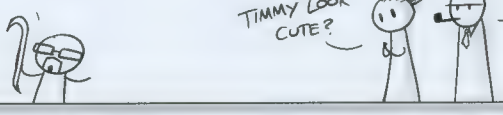
NERD SPECS
COMPLETE THE FREEMAN LOOK! PROTECT YOUR EYES FROM FLYING ENTRAILS! FEIGN INTELLIGENCE!



PRESS-ON BEARD
MADE FROM THE FACIAL HAIR OF REAL SCIENTISTS*

WIND-UP HEADCRAB
ALL THE CUTENESS OF THE ORIGINAL, WITHOUT THE THREAT OF ZOMBIFICATION.

STRING-PULL BARNEY.



*MAY HAVE ORIGINALLY FALLEN OUT DUE TO RADIATION EXPOSURE

MEGATRON™
EVIL IN MOTION
His personality will always be the same – egotistical, ambitious, ruthless. But as far as conversion goes, he's only getting better with age! This all-new MEGATRON™ figure is designed for greater conversion and even more incredible poses. And new MECH ALIVE™ technology revs the evil action into high gear!
MECH ALIVE
TRANSFORMERS
REVENGE OF THE FALLEN
DREAMWORKS PICTURES
Product shown in fantasy situation.
Product and colors may vary. © 2009 DreamWorks LLC and Paramount Pictures Corporation. Manufactured under
TOMY Company, Ltd. ® and/or TM* & © 2009 Hasbro. All Rights Reserved. TM & © denote U.S. Trademarks.
TRANSFORMERS.COM

Junk in the Trunk

words Evan Shamoon

One of the true success stories in gaming's indie revolution—and perhaps the most critically acclaimed of all Sony's downloadable exclusives—has been Q-Games' PixelJunk series. Racers, Monsters, and Eden have all been a part of the label's short but illustrious history, with a fourth addition to the PJ family and a PSP rendition of Monsters being added to the mix later this year. To get a better sense of how Q-Games manufactures its particular brand of highly addictive gaming substance, we spoke with president and founder Dylan Cuthbert.

Play: What would you say has been the over-arching theme for the PixelJunk series? How would you define what you have accomplished with the series?

Dylan Cuthbert: 1080p, 60 frames per second, addictive 2D gameplay. I don't think we have accomplished everything quite yet with the series, but hopefully we have helped open the eyes of a lot of gamers by showing them a little bit of what games used to be like…in a modern enough way that perhaps their interest will remain.

Play: Was PixelJunk initially conceived as a four-game series, or did that happen somewhat organically after the first game was finished?

DC: The PixelJunk series was conceived as a series without a specific end, and with multiple "groups" of games—hence the numbering system. The first number is the series, the second number is the index within that series. The first series consists of unordinary 2D games, and the second series will consist of "unordinary" 3D games. Once we get a ways into the second series we'll have a think about what the third series will be; maybe each title in that series will be a full price title…

Play: How long did each PixelJunk game take to produce, and how many people worked on each game?

DC: Each game takes a different amount of time and people. After creating the prototype it is taking us about 6-8 months to take each game to completion now, just to achieve the quality we are trying to attain. The original plan was to make the games more quickly, but we're finding it more pleasant with a 6-8 month production. While we are prototyping the team is very small (just one or two people), and when we move into full production the team grows to about six, max.

Play: Is your staff primarily Japanese or Western? Do you find any notable differences in the skill sets of your Japanese and Western employees?

DC: The staff is primarily Japanese, although the programmers are mostly Western. The game designers are primarily Japanese and the artists are about half and half. There is a much larger culture of programming in the West than in Japan, and that makes quite a difference in the base skill set. We do, however, have very good Japanese programmers as well. Japanese game designers tend to have much greater attention to detail than Western ones, I've found. Western game designers tend to focus on story more than the individual systems and polish that Japanese game designers focus on.

Play: How do you define the key difference between Japanese and Western/American game design, generally?

DC: To elaborate on my previous answer, Japanese game designs tend to be minutely thought and fleshed out as an iterative process, first finding out what's actually fun and what kind of system the game is going to be, a long time before any kind of backstory has been thought of. I have always found this process to be quite the opposite in the West, with the story/characters thought out a long time before any code is written. Neither way is wrong or more right than the other, of course, but I tend to enjoy the Japanese approach more, because stuff is more choppable/interchangeable well into the project.

Play: Are you interested in making big-budget games, or is your foreseeable future going to be spent in the indie downloadable space?

DC: Who knows, but right now we are really enjoying making the games we make. I certainly wouldn't rule out a big budget game, but if I would want the same kind of creative control I have now if I were to do that kind of thing again. For something that takes so much time and effort to make, a lot of people making big budget games really don't have any amount of decent control over what they are making. It's important to get creative control ripped out of the hands of marketing executives, and put it firmly back into the hands of the people actually making the game on a daily basis.

Play: What, in your opinion, has been the biggest hurdle for advancement of videogames as an original, creative form? Has the advent of downloadable console and portable games essentially changed the landscape, from your perspective?

DC: Yes, it has completely changed the landscape. It instantly reduced the budgets required to make a game down to levels that developers themselves can manage. This is why you have seen an explosion of creativity on the downloadable games front over the past two years. The lower risk has simply allowed creators to get their lost control back again. It is similar to the creativity shown in the late 80's.

Play: How did you end up starting a studio in Japan? Was it a concerted effort to create games from a stylistic vantage point that would have been more difficult elsewhere?

DC: I lived in Kyoto for five years back in the early 90s and decided that was the place I wanted to live and work, and the only major games company in Kyoto is Nintendo, for whom I had already spent time working, so I decided to take the plunge and set up my own company—there was nothing to lose really. That was in 2001, and we've had eight years of growth since then.

Being in Kyoto definitely helped the PixelJunk series—Kyoto has an enormous wealth of independent musicians and artists, and we have already collaborated with two of them (Otograph for Monsters, and Baiyon for Eden). For the fourth title we are collaborating with a London indie group called High Frequency Bandwidth, consisting of Alex Paterson (The Orb) and Dom Beken. This also came about thanks to Kyoto and the network of indie musicians that exist here…I have known Alex for about 10 years thanks to this network, and it's about time we're able to work together.

Play: What is your sense of the Japanese videogame market for your sort of games? While the notion of a society embracing progressive, original content seemed like more of a possibility in Japan 10 years ago than anywhere else in the world, it seems that the "mainstream" (read: non-otaku) interest in the medium has waned in the past decade.

DC: The market in Japan for our kind of games isn't particularly large, unfortunately. There are several reasons for this, one of which is that Famitsu Weekly, the premier gaming magazine in Japan, *still* doesn't review downloadable games, so we get no promotion or scores in the place everyone looks for them. On top of that, HDTVs have sold well here, but the number of HDTVs that are connected to PS3s is actually quite low, because the TV in a Japanese household tends to be used for TV and not for games nowadays. Then to top it all off, even adult Japanese people quite often don't own a credit card—credit cards are kind of frowned upon here, and many restaurants don't accept them at all

Even in this bleak environment Monsters has sold pretty well, and is very popular among the people who have played it. We always joke that every game developer in Japan has played Monsters and Eden, because every developer we meet here is a huge fan of both.

Play: Finally, what are your immediate plans?

DC: Our immediate plans are to finish up PixelJunk 1-4 and PSP Monsters, and then start work on PixelJunk 1-5, and maybe the first game in the second series, or maybe a sixth game for the first series…whichever one we think up a good idea for first!

©2009 NC interactive, Inc. ALL rights reserved. Aion, NCsoft, the interlocking NC Logo, and all associated logos and designs are trademarks or registered trademarks of NCsoft Corporation. PC DVD-ROM Online logo ™ and © EMA 2006. The rating icon is a trademark of the Entertainment Software Association. All other registered trademarks or trademarks are property of their respective owners.

iPhone GAMING

wordie Evan Shamoon

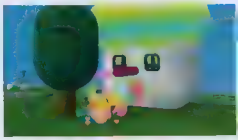
Top Gunners

Those looking to take their iPhones to the skies would behoove themselves to check out the recently released Top Gun. Using the machine's tilt functionality, the arcade-y, on-rails shooter is reminiscent of Afterburner (in a good way), and the controls never get in the way. Ice Man and Maverick make appearances (though without the homoerotic tension you might expect), and it's available now for $1.99.

Massively Effective

Noby Noby Phones Home

Katamari Damacy creator Keita Takahashi recently revealed plans for an iPhone version of his mega-weird PSN title, Noby Noby Boy. It will supposedly interface with the PlayStation 3 version of the game, and is still without a release date. Fortunately, as Takahashi told his audience at GDC, "price-wise [the game] might be like free."



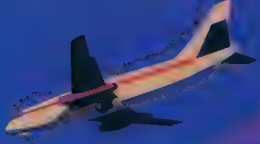
Xbox Anywhere

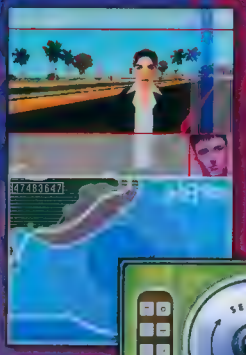
In the "iPhone may be getting some competition" department, reports are starting to surface that Microsoft is in the final design stages of a "new digital entertainment handheld". Combining the best elements of Xbox, Zune, and a "Live Anywhere" service, the device, codenamed xYz, is said to offer gaming and media playback, as well as Internet connectivity—and the thing may even possibly serve as your cell phone. Expect final word from Microsoft at E3, one way or the other.

The twisted minds behind
No More Heroes,
Suda51 and Grasshopper Manufacture,

bring a new cult classic
to North America:

Flower Sun and Rain





MURDER AND MYSTERY IN PARADISE

Solve the mysteries of Lospass Island.
Once you arrive, your life is
thrown into a bizarre loop,
in which you must disrupt a
deadly plot while
saving your own sanity.

www.flowersunandrain.com

NINTENDO DS.

Marvelous Entertainment USA, Inc.
www.mmvus.com

XSEED GAMES
www.xseedgames.com

TEEN
Alcohol and Tobacco Reference
Mild Blood
Mild Language
Mild Suggestive Themes
Mild Violence
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

© 2006 Marvelous Entertainment Inc. All Rights Reserved. Licensed to and published by Marvelous Entertainment USA Inc. Nintendo DS is a trademark of Nintendo. © 2006 Nintendo. The ratings icon is a registered trademark of the Entertainment Software Association.

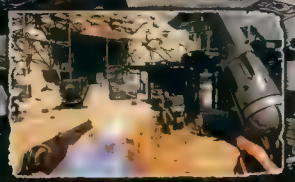
PC
DVD-ROM
SOFTWARE
PS3
PLAYSTATION 3
XBOX 360
LIVE

DON'T MESS WITH
THE McCALLS

THE WILD WEST, 1864. In order to save their family, the McCall brothers will kill anyone who stands between them and the legendary Gold of Juarez. Though women and greed will test their bond as brothers, the blood they share will prove to be thicker.

Experience a story full of greed, lust, and lawlessness

Choose to embody Ray or Thomas, each with a distinctive gameplay style



Online multiplayer with unique modes, maps, and classes for hours of Wild West action

CALL OF JUAREZ
BOUND IN BLOOD

CALLOFJUAREZ.COM

JUNE 30TH

MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
Strong Language
Suggestive Themes
Violence

TECHLAND

UBISOFT

The New Reality of Persistent Development

words Nick Marroni

In just the very brief amount of time it's been on the scene, even more so than the mainstream-captivating Wii, Apple's iPhone has had an irrevocable impact on the industry. (Full disclosure: My awesome company, Marroni Electronic Entertainment, being one of the developers of the awesome iPhone physics sim iLikeCereal, I may be a bit biased, though I do my best not to be. Honest. Now buy my game, please.) Aside from the numerous innovations in distribution and marketing and real democratization of a platform, it's the iPhone's app store, with its ability to bring fans to the game development table like never before, that can't be emphasized enough. Through the built-in user review system of the app store, players are directly telling developers what they want out of their games and then rewarding those creators that listen and respond, by updating and expanding their titles through continued development of long 'shipped' games, with sales success.

Subatomic Studios' excellently addictive tower defense title Fieldrunners is one of the best and, as one of the top paid apps of the app store's young history, also one of the most successful examples of this new persistent development model out there today. Subatomic CEO and Fieldrunners artist Sergei Gourski explained that their flagship title is still very much part of the studio's main focus. "I don't think we stopped [development] after we released, because we completely rewrote the engine, a lot of the functionality, since we released 1.0—we learned so many more new things," he said. And, to be clear, though a lot of the initial updates were essentially technical upgrades and bug fixes, the following ones and those currently being worked on were and are anything but, as Sergei continued, "Then we did a 1.2 release, where we introduced new towers and more maps and stuff. It's sort of an ongoing thing, it never stopped, it hasn't stopped yet—every month that goes by, we're still working on making new stuff for Fieldrunners."

So, what? Haven't Blizzard and Valve been doing the same thing for years with WoW and Counter-Strike—heck, StarCraft still sees regular updates and that game was born in an entirely different millennium. Maybe, but all of the above are multiplayer-focused titles whose updates were crafted purely as enhancements of their multiplayer components with, in StarCraft's case, the nation of South Korea being the sole reason for one of those examples. This new trend of persistent development is one that applies to single-player titles just as much as it does to gaming's traditionally, continually tweaked, polished, and perfected multiplayer experience.

DLC, like GTA IV's The Lost & The Damned or Fallout 3's The Pitt, are but early indicators of this emerging force and reality in game development. Developers and publishers alike are loathe to spend two-to-three years on a title, ship it, and hope it makes some money. The network capabilities of the current-gen's platforms to keep gamers and game makers connected in ways not available in previous generations and the fact of relentlessly rising development costs ensure this will be a rapidly developing and self-reinforcing trend. Subatomic CEO Gourski made it clear how much of an impact he thinks this new way will have on the industry. "I think that's really the model that everybody's going to embrace in the future; continued support for their applications, especially for the successful ones," he said.

Ok—if this is such a big deal and will be the new norm for developers, then why are these small, independent developers leading the charge on this and why on the iPhone?

The main reasons that the iPhone is breaking new ground on this all have to do with the digital nature and indie-friendly structure of Apple's app store.

"DLC, like GTA IV's The Lost & The Damned or Fallout 3's The Pitt, are but early indicators of this emerging force and reality in game dev."

Persistent development at its best.

The iPhone is the first major games console where retail is simply not part of the equation—you can't drive down to a store and pick up a game for the iPhone even if you wanted to, not that anyone ever would. Also unlike retail, where shelf space is all important, sales success really comes down to popularity, meaning, the more you sell, the more you sell. What that translates to is that the more successful apps place higher on the charts and any app that's in the top 25 is doing some decent and regular business. And, when the store where people buy their games has a user-aggregated review score displayed right alongside the games, then making and keeping your customers happy takes on a whole new level of importance.

Ash Monif, Subatomic COO, is more than well aware of that fact. "We think that supporting the community is key; we've been really fortunate that the community has embraced us and we are very thankful for that," he said. In an environment where actual gamer opinion holds the most weight and they can post their thoughts of the game directly to other gamers and the developers themselves, it's no longer the media, old print or new web, or even Metacritic that defines the market, but the end users themselves.

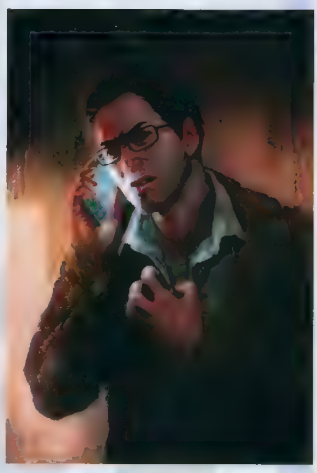
Oftentimes, gamers will post a long detailed list of comments, complaints, and suggestions on how to make the game better, doing so in the knowledge that the makers will actually read, and quite possibly implement, exactly the changes they ask for. Monif further remarked on how Subatomic plans to improve their titles by respecting their fans. "We're just going to keep on trying to make a great game and talking to our community, and listening, and challenging ourselves to keep doing good stuff," he said.

This new reality of persistent development is quite a recent trend and the traditional way of making, shipping, and then getting started on the sequel to a title will exist for some time. However, this new model is clearly one that appeals to both gamers and developers alike and its mutual benefits will, for most, surely prove very hard to resist in the very near future. Besides, in an interactive medium such as this, isn't it only fitting that all aspects of it become so, not just user participation in its consumption, but in that of its creation as well?

Time will tell which creators will succeed in this new arena and which will fail, but, as far as Subatomic is concerned, COO Monif is sure that they've got nothing to worry about. "Keep your eye on us," he said. "You're going to keep seeing good things from us for quite a while, for a long time to come."

romeo_check_fail

words Eric-Jon Rössel Waugh



> "Don't for a moment think that there's a difference between mechanical and conceptual elegance."

Over the last 20 years, this medium has been dominated by two warring factions. You have the camp that, for whatever reason, wants to improve videogames by ladening them with the trappings of other forms—especially film. And then you have the hardcore yo-yos who idolize the forms and textures of the past: what has been is all there will ever be, and that is The Videogame.

In the first case, the idea is that videogames are great, wow, yeah, but they're not emotional enough, or don't appeal to people in familiar enough a way, or there's no easy way to tell the kind of stories we're used to with the existing tools, so we'll take a cross-disciplinary, multimedia route.

In the second case, the only legitimate use of the medium is to remix familiar objects and tropes. Every new development is an attempt at perfection of those values. It is justified to keep pumping out identical Zelda or Castlevania games, because one of them may put all of the pieces in just the right order.

Neither of these mindsets is evil; blinkered as they may be, they each have a point. Each, however, is talking counter purposes to the other. The liberal artsy obliviousness of the former approach enrages the latter camp; the locals feel these presumptuous city folk threaten their ways and traditions. The conservatism of the latter camp confounds and frustrates the first group, as they just want to use these neat new tools for themselves, to jazz up their own creative endeavors.

You can see the problem here: neither group is really addressing the needs and potential of the medium itself; they're each just playing to their own expectations. The one group, in its breathless rush to incorporate videogames into its existing notions of entertainment, is ignoring the nature of the beast. The other guys are basically saying there is no potential; videogames are what they are, and get your peanut butter out of my chocolate.

So, little surprise that most videogames are some awkward compromise between these ideals: recycled ideas from 25 years ago, dressed up with borrowed disciplines from other media. And little surprise that most videogames are confused garbage. Those few that base their appeal entirely on said nature-of-beast—namely the psychology of cause and effect within a clearly defined system—tend to stand out as revolutionary.

The ridiculous thing is, structurally, psychologically, Portal really does little more than did Super Mario Bros. in 1985. It's a bit more elegant and impish, and its writing is truly lovely, but really, when our biggest epiphanies consist more of dumping baggage—20 years' worth, belonging to both factions—than of exploring new expressive territory, we're in a bit of a muddle! We're back to saying, okay, here's that rough template again—but what do we *do* with it? Generally, the answer from either camp is: "Let's tack on some more crap!" And the cycle begins again.

So, okay. How do we break this cycle? Quick and dirty answer, to both camps: combine your frickin' outlooks, already. The problem isn't that videogames are a poor medium for expression; it's that you're imposing alien ideas of expression onto the medium, rather than familiarizing yourself with the tools at hand. Likewise, the problem of making videogames "fun" isn't solved by piling on strata of random systems and controls to master; it's by making the player's every decision feel somehow important.

Somehow, I say. That's pretty vague. Well, okay. Here.

In Asteroids, every shot you take is important. Every shot has the literal potential to change the world. You break a rock, you have a new situation: smaller, faster rocks; harder to hit! Every rock you clear means that much more space and opportunity to deal with what's left. Depending on the angle and distance of your shot, you could make your life much easier or much more difficult. As simple as it is, the game is visceral. It's intense. The only letdown comes when you move from one wave to the next, and you realize in the bigger picture all your work has been meaningless. New rocks, new spaces. All you've changed is the level number and your score. Oh well.

In Silent Hill 2, every monster represents some part of the protagonist's psyche. The player's every action is recorded and interpreted, behind the scenes, like a passive personality test, to determine the protagonist's mental state, and thereby his motivation in the game's narrative. In the end, the player's behavior patterns determine the key explanation for the game's premise. This is all lovely and rather ingenious; the problem is that in the short term, the game is minimally responsive to the player's actions. From moment to moment, playing is kind of an act of faith that maybe all this clumsy drudgery will add up to something.

So "importance" is a broad concept. It can be immediate, long-term, thematic, tangible, objective, subjective. The challenge is in marrying all of these; stacking them the way that Portal stacks nearly infinite mechanics onto *two buttons*. Elegance, my dear.

Don't for a moment think that there's a difference between mechanical and conceptual elegance; remember what we're talking about here. The whole point of videogames is cause and effect. The design challenge is in how elegantly you can explore the ramifications of a given system. That system is defined by the rules set out by the game's mechanics—the behavior allowed the player, and the canvas upon which to behave.

To put a finer line on it, a well-designed videogame is an emotionally satisfying videogame; to make a videogame emotionally satisfying, you start by thinking about it as a videogame. Everything that goes into a game design reflects on its psychological potential.

Okay, fine. Let's say I've made my point: there is both an objective and a subjective component to everything the player does, and can do, in a videogame. Nice theory, but so what? Well. . come back next month, and maybe I'll tell you.

Gaming Culture

Let the Joystick Repeat

Those looking to bring a little life to those white walls would be well-served to check out John Freeborn's Etsy page. The designer custom-printed a pattern of dots in a joystick, then repeated in three colors—it's hand drawn, one of a kind, ink on paper, 11" x 17", and has already sold for $60. Fortunately, it's also a simple concept that could be very easily reproduced by the diligent amongst you.
www.etsy.com

Windosill

Flash games are not dead! Case in point: Windosill is one of the best we've seen in years, full of pushable, pullable, and otherwise manipulable objects of whimsy. The basic goal is to maneuver a toy train through rooms full of various toys by playing with them, but as expected, it's more than meets the eye. The mouse-based controls, lack of inventory puzzles, and sheer visual creativity should serve as a surefire cure for any case of the Workdays.

The first five levels of Windosill are available in the free version, and you can get the full game for a paltry $3.
www.windosill.com

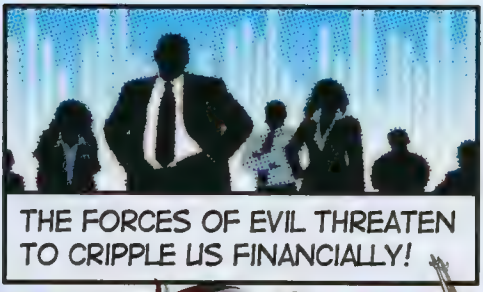
Playing Defense

"Tower defense games" may represent the single fastest-growing genre since the "first-person shooter;" particularly on mobile devices, where simplicity and fun are at a premium, they have been coming out in spades.
And now Popcap, the time-suckers behind such hits as Bejeweled, Zuma, and Peggle, has its own addition to the burgeoning genre: Plants Vs Zombies, which hit Mac and PC last month. The idea is simple: defend a house against zombie attackers, with limited resources and limited space on your lawn. There's only one resource to worry about—sunlight —and there are various plants at your disposal to do so. Each has its own unique function, for which you'll have to take building costs and time into account. If you've technically given up computer games for iPhones and PlayStations, know this: it's ridiculously good, goes for 20 bucks, and is a reminder that the platform doesn't matter when the game is good enough. www.popcap.com/games/mac/pvz

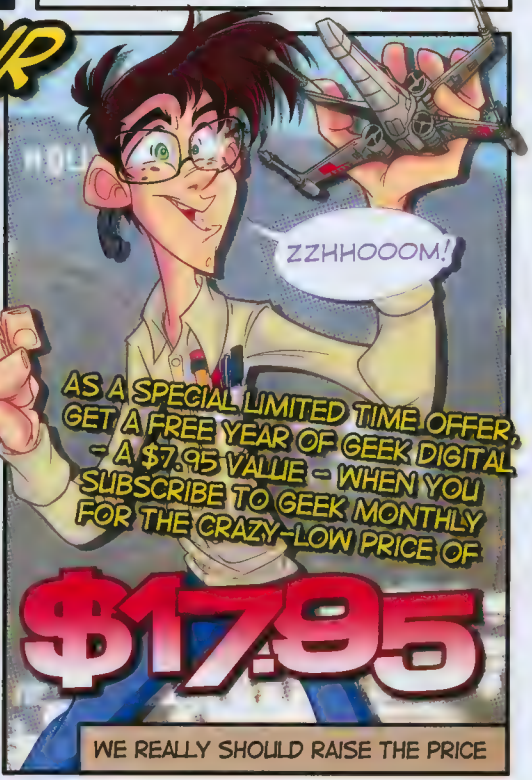
Darth Invader

UK fashion label Super Combo has just released its newest design, and it's a doozy: Steven Lefcourt, who frequently does work for shirt.woot and Threadless, has mashed Darth and Space in this sweet t-shirt. Get your own Space In-vader in the Super Combo online store for 15 pounds. supercombo.bigcartel.com

DATELINE: AMERICA


THE FORCES OF EVIL THREATEN TO CRIPPLE US FINANCIALLY!

WE'VE GOT YOUR STIMULUS PACKAGE RIGHT HERE!


ZZHHOOOM!
AS A SPECIAL LIMITED TIME OFFER, GET A FREE YEAR OF GEEK DIGITAL - A $7.95 VALUE - WHEN YOU SUBSCRIBE TO GEEK MONTHLY FOR THE CRAZY-LOW PRICE OF
$17.95
WE REALLY SHOULD RAISE THE PRICE

THE RESULTS ARE IN!
NATHAN
J.J.ABRAMS
GEEK READERS LIVE LONGER, HAPPIER LIVES THEN READERS OF ANY OTHER MONTHLY MAGAZINE!

ALL THIS AND MORE AT GEEKMONTHLY.COM
geek

All You Need To Know About Game Development Can Be Learned From Bad '80s Coming of Age Films

words Brandon Justice

As a game developer, I often get roped into conversations like, "Gee, Brandon, that job sounds wicked-cool. What sort of strange sexual favors did you have to perform to solidify your spot as a creator of compelling content in the wacky bidness of the video gaming?"

I'm not quite sure ***why*** they wanna know, or what they hope to glean from a drunken retelling of my haphazard dash for cash and ass in the wild world of digital entertainment, but chances are, I tell 'em anyways. And not just because I enjoy talking about myself (which I do) or because it's a fun story (which it is), but mostly because I tend to appreciate the perspective that comes with realizing how crazy I was to make the leap in the first place.

But before ya down a 5-Hour Energy and tape your eyelids open in anticipation of the awesomeness that is my interactive origin, rest assured that I'll spare ya the pain and pontification and simply skip to the fact that getting into the games industry is more difficult than it ought to be.

Further, it's a topic that been done to death.

There are lots of theories, most of which suck, but one that absolutely rings true is the fact that proximity doesn't hurt, and the one place you can find exactly that is your friendly neighborhood QA department.

Yes, friends, those bug-bashing bastions of opinion and angst that seem to revel in rage over their department's resemblance to a revolving door of gaming geekery have indeed stumbled upon one of the best ways to at least pretend to expose themselves to the hairy ass of game creation, and while I have no desire to ramble on about how having your own blog just might make ya a famous gaming journalist, I'd love to speak for a few on a topic near and dear to my gaming heart:

> "Most gaming companies treat their QA departments like complete, utter shit, and that's really, really stupid."

Most gaming companies treat their QA departments like complete, utter shit, and that's really, *really* stupid.

Yup, you heard me.

It's f'n dumb.

Not just because of "The Man's" tendency to see them as a disposable resource (which most do), or because the failure to educate them in any real way about the means and methods used to build games (which most don't), or even because they fail to see value in people who are willing to endure lousy pay, lousy hours, and a laughably low level of input just to sniff at chance to break in to what we do.

I say this because, at the end of the day, QA isn't just a tool to reduce the number of annoying audio glitches, help menu typos or those harrowing hardware equivalents of brain freeze.

No, my friends, when you handle it right, QA isn't just some sort of sick, sad Swiss army knife of agenda-advancing nonsense used by the average marketing department to focus-group-fuck your product into mediocrity; it's an incalculably valuable asset to the development arm of any game team worth its salt. It's a training ground. A proving ground. A well-spring of ideas and energy that almost assuredly has the one thing the majority of seasoned schlepps we've all interview for the all-important position of junior designer #15 on random sequel #4:

Empathy.

They may not know what's realistic, they often don't know how to pick their battles, and they probably don't understand why most choices get made, but if you ask me, the one thing these guys bring to the table is that they are ***in it***.

What I mean by that is simply that, more than any other group in PD, these poor bastards spend more time playing your games than anyone else. Further, they tend to be career gamers who are very well-versed in competing products, your franchise's history, and the industry in general.

Yep, these folks live and die by the Jaffe, Inc. motto, and what they lack in polish, presentation, and preparation, they more than make up through a core set of characteristics shared by almost every asshole I actually enjoy working with in this business, and yet, we as an industry tend to completely fail to teach them how to temper the innate knowledge and nuttiness that fuels them in an effort to build competent developers.

Instead, we chastise them for making honest mistakes. We often fail to invite them to company parties. We make them work ridiculous amount of overtime and cut them loose like retail rejects at the end of shopping season.

OK, to be fair, that last bit is happening to plenty of folks across all disciplines these days, but the point remains:

We're missing a big opportunity to nurture young talent here.

I mean, we spend millions of dollars to create professional pipelines with prestigious universities that tend to produce a bunch of over-educated, under-experienced entitlement engines that make our collective heads hurt more often than not, but have you ever heard of a similar scheme to grow tester into a full-blow developer?

Seriously, guys. The #%&?!?

I mean, I've met, worked with, and interview countless kids coming out of our collective efforts in formal gaming education, and the fact is, most of them suck. Not because they're stupid (most of them are brilliant) or because they don't take it seriously (most of them are more process-inclined than seasoned vets). No, these kids make baby Jesus cry because no matter how much you read about it or talk about it or think about it, there's just no teacher like experience.

And by, this, I do not mean working on some thesis or theory you tooled for two months with your buddies in an effort to make your way onto some ITT tech infomercial that invariably interrupts the average evening viewer's appreciation of what it is we do for a living; but real-deal, balls out game development.

It's why I don't trust a skinny cook, a sober bartender or a marketing guy who doesn't own a console, and it's why I'd take a smart kid from QA over the average college flunky who thinks making games would be cool *any day of the week*, and it's why the people who still treat their testers like garbage ought to have to answer to someone for the fact that they're wasting time, money, and talent with each passing project.

Rather than enabling these people to kick ass and make the most of the carefully controlled effort to make games better, most folks seem content to systematically eliminate any ability they might have to glean even an *ounce* of interesting input out of some of the most passionate, knowledgeable employees they have on their payroll, and honestly, it just breaks my heart.

And not everyone is guilty of it. Some companies really go all out to ensure that quality assurance helps hone their products into playable, palpable experiences by bringing them into the fold as developers that sit side-by-side with designers, producers, artists, audiophiles, and engineers to make the magic happen, but these experiences are sadly the exception, not the rule.

If you're one of the latter, I salute you. But if you still sequester your glitch gatherers in some lightless architectural offshoot of your main building, forcing them to suck down the sorrow of being the prom queen's best friend to the tune of eight bucks an hour, I kinda hate your face.

Seriously, though.

If it's not too much trouble, take it easy on your brothers and sisters in QA. Better yet, take one under your wing and make it a point to help plug them in to what you do. They may be a bit rough around the edges, but these kids are the **heart and soul** of what we do.

Instead of treating them like second-class citizens and harping on how detached they are from reality, maybe it's time to get wise to the fact that their lack of gravity is as much a telling commentary on our inability as resource wrangling developmental managers than anything else.

Maybe then it will get better. Maybe then, you'll start to appreciate what they bring to the table. And then maybe, *just maybe* you'll find out why they've been putting up with all your crap for all those years when they finally get a shot at something better. Couldn't hurt to find out, right?

Brandon Justice is currently looking for smelly, underpaid, nerd-mongers to help beta test his team's latest creation as Design Director at Quick Hit Sports. Kidding. About the smelly part. Anyways, mail him at bjustice@quickhit.com for more info.

MONSTER HUNTER
FREEDOM UNITE
"It may be the only UMD you keep in your PSP through 2009"
-1UP.com
AVAILABLE NOW
DOWNLOAD THE DEMO FROM THE PLAYSTATION® STORE
In The World of Monster Hunter, You're Never Alone
Exclusively available on PSP® (PlayStation® Portable) system with 4-player Ad-Hoc Mode
TEEN T
Blood
Comic Mischief
Fantasy Violence
Use of Alcohol
CAPCOM
capcom-unity.com
PSP
PlayStation Portable
Only On PlayStation.
MONSTER HUNTER FREEDOM UNITE
www.encyclopedia-gigantica.com

The Ties That Bind

A history of Play's biggest influences: Part 1

025 Casey Loe
025 Heather Anne Campbell
027 Brady Fiechter
028 Dave Halverson

Casey Loe

Only the Good Die Young

Five Generations of Developers who Blew Me Away, and then Blew Away

Times are tough for video game developers, with well-regarded studios going bust or being dumped by their publishers on a near-weekly basis. But if the recent string of developer failures seems unprecedented, it's mostly because we're not used to it happening in our backyard. When Japan dominated game development, its developers suffered an equally painful bloodletting with each generational shift. These collapses didn't always make headlines—there's less industry-focused reporting in Japan, and failing companies rarely go through public bankruptcies. So while many lauded and influential Japanese studios of yesteryear may remain in business on paper, they've abandoned game development and resigned their unique and creative game-design philosophies to be chalked up as failures in the annals of history.

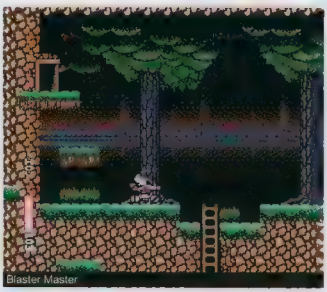
The Days of Wine and ROM Chips

In the days of the Famicom/NES, the Japanese seemingly couldn't lose in the game industry. Electronics and telecom companies were flush with cash and eager to invest it in the next big thing, and development costs were so low that anyone could get into the game. If you could score a release window from Nintendo, you would almost certainly make money. And if you didn't, who cared? Either your division was a small cog in a larger company that wasn't expected to turn an immediate profit, or you had a part-time staff of five and could make up the losses by working a few extra shifts at MOS Burger. Nintendo's exclusive licenses forbade publishers from supporting any other console platform (woe to Sega's poor Master System) so there weren't any hard decisions for third-party developers to make. It was a simpler time. And then, things got complicated.

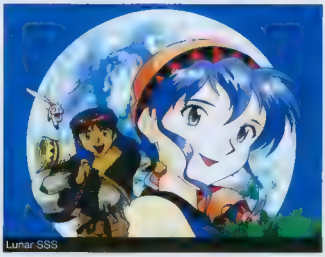
The First Casualties of the Nintendo Generation

Third-parties would only put up with Nintendo's rules for so long. Eager to expand the market, HudsonSoft teamed up with NEC to create the PC Engine (which I refuse to refer to by its stupid American name, "the Turbografx-16"), and a few other companies were fed up enough with Nintendo's exclusivity rules and engineered cartridge shortages to give it a shot. Sega's Genesis further chipped away at Nintendo's stranglehold on the industry, and Nintendo eventually had to loosen their rules to lure publishers to their own Super Nintendo. Suddenly, third-parties were forced to leave the NES's warm, safe womb, and enter a world of fierce competition, higher technical specs, and hard platform choices. Several distinguished publishers miscarried on the spot.

Monster World

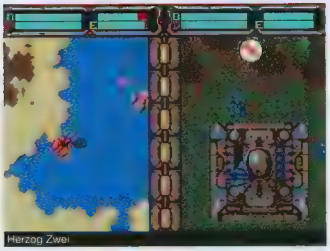

Blaster Master

Sylpheed


Lunar SSS

Remember **Culture Brain**? They rocked the NES with such games as The Magic of Scheherazade, Flying Warriors, and Little Ninja Brothers, combining action with RPG elements in unique and imaginative ways. They were a highly regarded developer on the NES, but their inability to get their act together on their Super NES follow-ups forced them to shutter their American office and reduced the company to a niche handheld publisher. It was a more merciful fate than met **Vic Tokai**, the beloved NES publisher of Golgo 13 and Clash at Demonhead. They didn't officially leave video game development until 1998, but they left quality behind long before that. The biggest fall from grace was **Sunsoft**, a publisher once held in the same regard as Capcom and Konami. They scored beloved NES hits with titles like Batman. Journey to Silius, and the legendary Blaster Master, but their fortunes soured with the 16-bit transition, and the company only narrowly survived bankruptcy in the mid-90s.

"In the days of the Famicom/NES, the Japanese seemingly couldn't lose in the game industry."


Herzog Zwei

Skies of Arcadia

"Another favorite developer that never made it out of the 16-bit ghetto was Westone"

The Niches to Nowhere

Failing to adapt well to new technology is a classic studio-killer, but backing the wrong horse is an even greater risk. The birth of the Genesis and PC Engine platforms provided an opening for new publishers and allowed niche developers to build passionate fanbases among smaller ponds of more engaged consumers. But when those platforms' successors flopped, even some of the big fish in the Genesis and PC Engine ponds went belly-up. **Technosoft** was one of the Genesis/Mega Drive's most beloved third parties; their Thunder Force series stands among the best side-scrolling shooters in gaming, and they can claim to have invented most aspects of the modern RTS with the way-ahead-of-its-time Herzog Zwei. A sequel to that was rumored to be in the works for the 32X, but was scrapped when that platform died, and their Saturn releases didn't fare much better. Attempts to build a PlayStation fanbase with new franchises like the RPG series Neorude went nowhere, and the company released its last game in 1999. Another favorite developer that never made it out of the 16-bit ghetto was **Westone**, makers of the Wonder Boy/Monster Lair series of side-scrolling action-RPGs (released on both the Genesis and PC Engine, under different titles). Westone is still in business doing ports of other companies' games, but never found a home for their flagship franchise on any of the new generation of platforms. At least they went out on top; the never-localized Monster World IV is rightly regarded as one of the best games on Sega's 16-bit hardware. **Masaya** was a wide-ranging publisher that made several good shooters and had plenty of great niche action franchises, including the Mega Man-esque Shubibin Man on PC Engine (one of which was localized as Shockman here), the Assault Suit series (also known as Target Earth and Cybernator), and the revered Langrisser series of strategy-RPG's (Warsong). But the franchises that were big news in *Mega Drive Beep* and *PC Engine Fan* magazines were met with indifference when Masaya attempted to bring them to the Super NES and later to the PlayStation. Masaya died like a dog in the street, with its desperate final releases on the abortive GameBoy rival known as the Wonderswan.

Silent Hill

Death by Hardware Transition, Part II

Even developers who picked the right platforms floundered in the transition from 16-bit to 32-bit, when the meteoric success of Sony Playstation forced Super Famicom developers to ditch everything they new in favor of CD-based games with 3D environments. That was the end of **Quintet**, whose Enix-published Action-RPGs were among the boldest and most thought-provoking games of the 16-bit generation. Their trademark theme of creation began with Actraiser, which combined solid side-scrolling action with an overhead Populous-esque "god game." It was one of the first truly ambitious SNES games, and it had one of the greatest soundtracks in video game history. Soul Blazer continued the theme of creation in a more natural fashion; the people you saved on your quest rebuilt the towns soul by soul. Quintet worked out their action-RPG kinks with their next release, Illusion of Gaia, and then brought the headier themes back in with Terranigma, a top-down action RPG in which you guided the world through billions of years of history, from the big bang to the birth of life to the dawn of humanity and beyond. It was thematically profound, visually and aurally beautiful, and it played great. The 16-bit era was the heyday of the action-RPG, and outside of the Zelda series, Quintet's games were the best the genre had to offer.

But Terranigma was released at the very end of the 16-bit era, which made Quintet a late arrival to the 32-bit party. For whatever reason, they took a break from their relationship with Enix and joined **Game Arts** in their ultimately disastrous Entertainment Software Publishing venture, an attempt to pool the resources and marketing dollars of niche publishers so they could compete in the higher-budget world of... Saturn development? Yes, even when the writing was pretty much on the wall for Sega, E.S.P. pegged the Saturn as the right market for niche publishers to stand out in the crowded game industry, and Game Arts almost proved their point by selling half a million copies of their Saturn masterpiece, Grandia. Quintet followed that up with Code R, an ugly and bizarrely conceived

Dreamcast™

racing/romance game that barely moved 2,000 units. Goodbye, Quintet.

Most of E.S.P.'s partners survived the venture's failure, but it pretty much destroyed Game Arts as well. Sure, the company is still in business, having made Grandia III and the awful Lunar: Dragon Song in 2005, but most of their post-E.S.P. output has been remakes, and they've now been reduced to making a licensed Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle game. It's a dramatic fall from grace for a company that managed to carve out fame and fortune for itself on the Sega CD and Saturn, the fringest of fringe platforms. That's the power of great writing and art; instead of putting a programmer in charge of writing some derivative anime story, Game Arts set the template for CD-based game development by creating a team with a professional novelist to compose Lunar's world and story, a famous character designer to draw the cast, and professional voice actors (then a rarity) to bring it to life. The first Lunar game was a masterpiece, and the second game was even better. And then that design team and GameArts obliterated the most promising new RPG franchise of the generation with a flurry of lawsuits and counter-lawsuits over unpaid royalties. Awesome.

Yet somehow, Game Arts had a second, equally great franchise in store for the Saturn: Grandia was a poignant and beautiful game that was every bit the equal of any PlayStation RPG and blew away even Sega's finest efforts on the Saturn. But its sequels struggled to capture the magic of the original, and it's hard to believe that the waning GameArts has a third great franchise in their vaults.

The Quiet Holocaust of the Current Generation

Despite a sharply shrinking game industry in Japan, the painful transition from a PlayStation 2-dominated market to the fractured Wii/PS3/Xbox 360 market hasn't seen many high-profile studio closures. But many wonderful developers are already in what may be their death spiral, on the long road to obscurity that begins with a transition from high-profile console games to licensed DS chaff. And the constant consolidation in the industry is clearly robbing us of talent; when **Sega** reabsorbed its second-party studios in 2004, its core game output was cut considerably, likely restructuring several great development teams and beloved franchises like Panzer Dragoon, Skies of Arcadia and Jet Set Radio out of existence. A similar thing happened at **Konami**, where the absorption of once-independent teams responsible for franchises like Silent Hill and Suikoden has seemingly resulted in those games no longer being made by their original creators, and left their developers mostly unaccounted for. The decline of arcade games has also wiped out dozens of teams, transforming **Sega's AM2** from one of their most prolific and acclaimed divisions into a shell of its former self, driving **Data East** out of business, splintering **SNK**, and transforming the once-mighty **Taito** into a minor division of Square Enix.

Making Sense of it All

Even the best developers are rarely more than a bomb or two away from oblivion, and no amount of success can ever lead anyone in this precarious industry to feel safe. But reminiscing about the tragic failures of yesterday should bring guidance and comfort to the developers of today. For there does seem to be a clear pattern at work here: if your company can succeed at crafting artful and imaginative games that truly excite me...then apparently you're totally f***ed.

Heather Anne Campbell

Something Special, Every Day

My father was a proud owner of a Betamax. We rented videos from a shop that actually carried Betamax tapes—can you believe it? Those tapes cost a hundred bucks each, but we found a place that rented Beta. Yeah. That was my family. My dad, he had a cellular phone before anyone else. It was housed in a small suitcase, and made the lights in the car grow dim when he plugged it in. My parents bought a CD player for the house in the 1980s. They weren't rich folks; they just liked their gadgets. My parents—especially my father—were geeks.

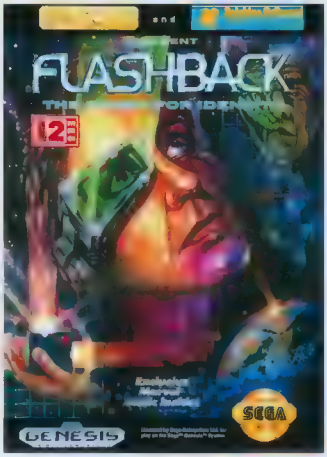
So when it came time to decide which system to buy for their video-game loving daughter, the choice was simple. Who would ever choose a roguish Entertainment System over the superior sounding *Master* System? Nintendo may have had a robot, but Sega had 3-D glasses. And their D-pads had little joysticks you could screw into them.

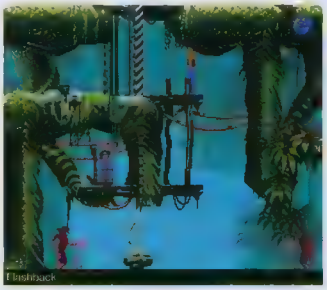
While my friends were talking about The Legend of Zelda, I was clutching my clam-shell Master System cases with pride. Those cases? They were the first, and most obvious thing Sega did right during the 8-bit years. Indispensable Software Packaging. Think on your video game collection. Have you thrown away your DS cases? Of course not. They're plastic, protective, just like the ol' Master System boxes. Moreover, the 8-Bit Sega library was unified by a consistent graphic design—a grid of blue lines framed the art in the foreground, except in some rare cases. Few people have a pristine library of NES boxes. Go ahead, take a quick look online. Now search for a Sega collection.

Final Fantasy VII

Those that own a Master System collection still have all the clam-shells. Proof of extraordinary foresight.

The other thing Sega did right was the hardware itself. The Master System looked classic and adult. The 8-bit console was molded from black and red, like the hardware my father kept under the television. The controllers were elegant extensions of the system, and the Phaser was thin and deadly. Sega gave us two different kinds of games, cartridge and card, for when our budgets demanded a little frugality. Card





Flashback

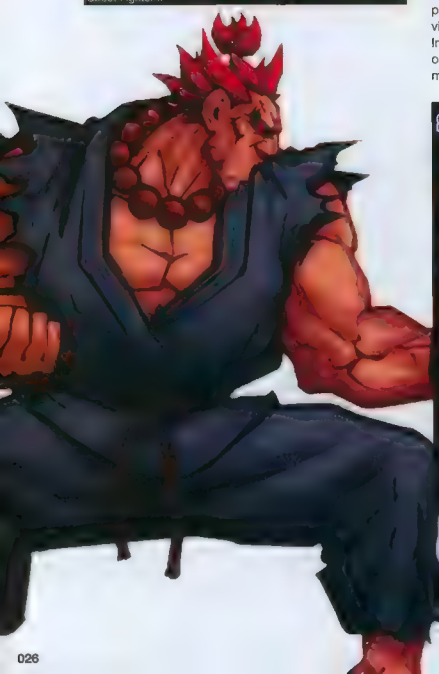
"The 8-bit console was molded from black and red, like the hardware my father kept under the television"

"Capcom meant Street Fighter II. Interplay meant Out of this World."

games were precursors to today's downloadables; smaller scale, cheaper. Sometimes more fun. Combine all this with the strength of Sega's first party titles, like Phantasy Star, Fantasy Zone, Kenseiden, Altered Beast, and it was Sega, Sega, Sega—the three most important companies of the 8-bit era, for me.

Alas, the 16-bit era spread my addiction between several companies. The Sega CD was still my extraordinary first love, and Sega's work on Sonic CD was exceptional. Ecco the Dolphin CD ate up an entire summer. Even Silpheed was fun to play. But I'd be lying if I didn't mention the effect that the SNES had on my 16-bit years.

Street Fighter II



Super Mario Galaxy

If it weren't for Capcom, I wouldn't be here, writing about games at my computer.

If it weren't for Interplay, and Delphine software, I wouldn't be so certain that games can have a soul.

Capcom meant Street Fighter II. Interplay meant Out of this World. Contrast the companies against one other, and they represent opposite strategies in gaming. Capcom bets on the sure thing; it's why they're still in business. Interplay takes risks. Sometimes it pays off—as with Out of this World (one of my top five video games of all time, easily). Fallout came to us via Interplay. Same with Shiny's Earthworm Jim (a favorite of Play's predecessor, GameFan). But risks don't always mean bank. Out of this World only spawned one sequel. Earthworm Jim is struggling to hit 4. But Megaman is up to number 9 now.

If Capcom is candy, then Interplay is vinaigrette. So, what was the 32-bit era, then? The PlayStation? The Saturn? The Nintendo 64? What were the developers that struck me, stuck with me, haunt me? When I close my eyes and remember my first apartment, at age 19, when I listen to the sounds of those old video games that rise up and greet me from the ether of my memory...

I hear Suikoden.
I hear Panzer Dragoon.
I hear Perfect Dark.

We're supposed to chose two or three developers to highlight here, but how can I? I can still hear the echo of late-night sessions of Mario Kart 64. I can feel the vibration in the air from the end of Final Fantasy VIII. I worked at Electronics Boutique and spent everything I earned at the same store. Gaming grew up with me—with us—and came out of our parents' basements, blossoming as full-featured entertainment. Street Fighter Alpha 2 on the Saturn, on those incredible imported pads. Tomb Raider 2. Mario, oh god, Mario 64. I'd argue that the late '90s represent the greatest shift in gaming until the dawn of online console play. Perhaps it was coincidence, the way my adolescence ended as gaming moved from two to three dimensions. I became an adult just as gaming began to explode onto itself. See, there's something that happens when you become an adult. You gain independence, but you lose the immortality of youth. Within the prize of freedom comes the poison of impermanence. There's a world to explore, but you will die in it.

And married to that moment, as if tethered to it on a cosmic line, was the sudden extension of video games into the third dimension. Paintings became worlds to investigate, with depth, corners, hidden spaces. These were not just mechanics to treasure, but worlds to get lost in, to become enveloped by. The depth of those games also represented a greater void when they were over. Who are the developers I applaud from that era? All of them. Every one that stepped up to the challenge I can't celebrate a single voice, when it was the sound of the choir that moved me

Brady Fiechter

The Dawn of Gaming

The Beginning

Once upon a time, in a land quite a bit different from our own, mathematicians and artists and engineers got together in their garages and basements, putting chisel to virtual stone, forging crude art that made noise and flashed patterns on a television monitor. It was good. To me, it was very good. Life was about to take on new meaning, and I didn't have a clue what that even meant.

In my basement fortress, I began to collect the growing number of cartridges that held this new form of hopelessly addictive entertainment. A pattern quickly emerged: I liked games with defined little worlds, shooting alien scum in Zaxxon and rescuing hapless Smurfs in Smurf. No one really knew what a ColecoVision was at the time, or the term video game, or what it meant to travel into the television screen to play with mesmerizing flashes of light and color. Those who did know were part of the club, existing in the shadows of the arcade and convening on the weekends to tell their battle tales and create new ones.

For many of us, history was being written—a simple video game timeline was taking form, marking the dominance of Pac-Man and Tetris while racing toward the next click, known as Age of Nintendo. It was now that video games established what it might mean to be obsessed with a hobby.

Discovery

Nintendo introduced the Nintendo Entertainment System, or NES as it would be known in loving shorthand around the world. At least around my world, which was becoming increasingly cultivated with games that evoked a spirit of adventure and deep fantasy. There was no escaping the orbital pull of great action games like Contra and Bionic Commando, but there was no NES, no obsession, without Zelda and Final Fantasy and Metroid and Castlevania. Here were notable experiences, the seeds of what would define the best games for years to come. Capable stories were increasingly being played out in my gamer imagination. Samus was on a quest, it was personal, and Mother Brain must be stopped—every corner of this moody world picked apart and touched before the mystery could be breached. Link was a little magical creature, certainly not human as I knew most humans, and I was taking a little bit of that awe I found in movies and overcoming my own conflicts, performing detailed tasks and collecting rubies that empowered my quest. In Final Fantasy, the ultimate fantasy of interacting inside a storybook was never quite done with such breadth and complexity, and the newness was intoxicating. Castlevania resonated, it was gothic and lyrical and a terrific gameplay challenge.

Nintendo birthed a new world of discovery.

Growth

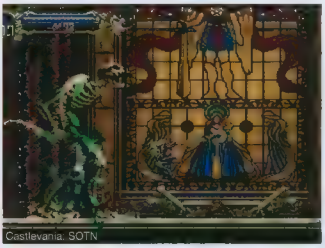
It was Nintendo that made me a true gamer, and it would be the Super Nintendo that started to define the language of what powered that truth. The Sega Master System lurked in the shadows of my basement, occasionally coming out to play with the odd obsession like Shinobi. It proved only natural that the company who claimed Square and Konami as ultimate creative friends would further strengthen their first-party spirit and create the 16-bit master: Super Nintendo Entertainment System. Nintendo continued to cement their influence in my gaming space, releasing Super sequels to what I loved in 8-bit, while offering the likes of Final Fantasy VI and Chrono Trigger and taking role-playing to the next level. Nintendo first-party at the time was branded as the house of Mario, but it was Super Metroid that left me feeling like video games could be something special; Super Metroid was an archetype that informed my favorite games of today.

Gaming had its claws in me deeper than ever. And as much as Nintendo had applied the most pressure to this point, it was the Sega CD and Game Arts that would step in to make the Genesis the next king of the hill. Lunar and Popfulmail, lovingly and egregiously translated by Working Designs, were defining experiences on a system that proved to be a cult favorite. The Sega CD may have rubbed some gamers the wrong way, but it had the games that soothed my sensibilities. Konami, proving once again they were the gamemakers at the top of my most-wanted list, took the Sega CD to its highest point with Snatcher, showcasing the young Hideo Kojima as a master of the early craft as storyteller and world builder. Super Metroid had just met its match for what I wanted out of games.

A New World

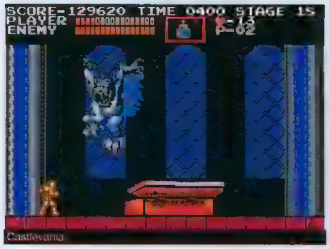
This is where the landscape really started to grow and transform into a confusing, competitive climate of bits and polygons and the effort to make games epic. The Sega Saturn, Nintendo 64, Sony PlayStation and Sega Dreamcast all intertwined into a singular gaming brain, its identity ceding to Sony and its bastard PlayStation. Guardian Heroes, Super Mario 64, The Legend of Zelda:

Suikoden



Castlevania: SOTN

> "...it was Super Metroid that left me feeling like video games could be something special."



Castlevania

Super Metroid

Resident Evil

"It started when Team ICO unveiled a quiet masterpiece called ICO..."

Ocarina of Time—three heavy hitters that will always be classics and further define my identity as a die-hard gamer at the time, but is Sony and a new guard of visionaries that marked this period on the gaming timeline.

Konami as a development house could do no wrong, releasing a trio of games that reinforced my love for world design and mood: Castlevania: Symphony of the Night, Silent Hill, and Suikoden. Square came in with Final Fantasy VII; Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee borrowed from my personal-favorite Flashback and created one of the more compelling visual spaces of its time.

Sony would continue to prove that the developers that had that something I wanted chose to create on their PlayStation, culminating in Tomb Raider and Resident Evil. Capcom and director Shinji Mikami framed my love of horror and pretty graphics in their zombie-infested mansion in the woods; Core Design—out of nowhere—tapped the spirit of Super Metroid and Delphine Software adventures, placing the seminal Lara Croft into a tomb-raiding setting that was cinematic and evocative. Core defined a new genre, and very few have been able to recapture that mystic spirit of adventure since.

And Beyond...

Sega pulls up stakes and leaves hardware manufacturing. Microsoft steps in with an ugly green box marked with an X. Nintendo disappointed with the N64 but was still Nintendo; the GameCube was bound for at least a moment of glory, or so I held out hope for. First-party Nintendo would continue to inform my love for gaming, even if that love had taken on an evolved meaning in the arms of Sony.

Nintendo still had Capcom, and Capcom still delivered. Resident Evil 4 would eventually kick ass and reignite the franchise as a fan favorite. And that, dear reader, was nearing a good bye to the Nintendo that would always sit front and center in my basement, hello to Microsoft and Sony as permanent fixtures of dominance.

It started when Team ICO unveiled a quiet masterpiece called ICO, in which so much of what I cherished about video games had been distilled into a singular, dramatic experience. Games at this point were about to get a little louder, a little meaner, a little less concerned with the fantastical. ICO was none of that. ICO is what the best games, to me, should be: thoughtful, classic, elegant and beautiful. Adventure.

Now that polygons were the staple and Microsoft was there to beef up that landscape with aggressive competition, games began to shape into an identity of inelegance and growing complexity; AI routines started carving out little lives and different gameplay approaches; cutscenes started telling stories. Lesser-known third-party developers outside of the Japanese influence—Capcom and Square and Konami were losing their grip—decided to bring remarkable games like The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay, Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath, and Ratchet and Clank into my fickle gaming home. This was a strange time, and times would get only stranger. And bigger and badder and more exciting than that first time the ColecoVision super-charged my television with interactive light.

To the Next Generation

Super-charged fuzzy interactive lines of light has now become HDMI-mainlined HD virtual reality. Games are maturing—and I don't much mean growing up—but in this expanding matrix of wisdom and complexity comes all the byproducts of age. A little bit of that important magic that sparkled in the earlier years is scattering in the wind, but it's still there, waiting to be scooped up by the right imaginations—and those who can break free from those pesky business-minded folk who like to tell us all what we like.

No one game the past couple of years has stood out like my favorites used to. The reasons why are many: games are more nuanced, more homogenized, more mass-level products that have so many bits and parts with so many ways to go wrong that my active experience inside the world is never quite what I fully desire. And games are becoming more cultural experience, distracted by so many components that a return to focus would do a great deal of good.

A company like Starbreeze has given me The Darkness and the lesser Assault On Dark Athena, both games of unusual cinematic impact and tremendous visual strength. They have such distinct ideas on

Super Mario Galaxy

display, even when they can't quite get that focus to pull it all together. Bioshock recalled that joy of seeing Abe's Oddysee for the first time, the kind of shadowy, oppressive beauty that felt a step above its peers. Call of Duty 4 was pure craft, a demonstration of mastery of design, engine and presentation that rendered its banal setting nearly irrelevant. Here was one of the great games of the generation, yet far from visionary—a fine example of how much farther we have to go in this industry and how far we've come.

Fallout 3 was the transporter back to the early days, when role-playing in the more traditional pen-and-paper sense ruled. It was a livable fantasy, a story for adults, it was a convincing world that could only be mapped with the canvas of a 360 or PS3. I felt the joy of collecting, like in a Mario, and I interacted with characters and cared about the world like I once did in Suikoden. I was lost in the spirit of belonging to an adventure. I was playing a role.

It is the Bethesdas and Infinity Wards and Starbreezes that I'm intrigued by, but it is the downloadable space that I admire and where I find hope. It is here where I see hints that ensure a future of gaming with the heart of a ColecoVision and the brain of a PS3. Great minds working in small groups with a very directed, unified vision is something to cling to: That Game Company and their soothing FLOWER, Number None and their heady Braid, Namco's classic reborn Pac-Man: Championship Edition.

And wouldn't you know it, Nintendo could once again be not just a nostalgic point of reference, but a reminder of why I continue to believe in games and their future. Go play 2D Boy's World of Goo on WiiWare and you'll see a little piece of every great game I've mentioned and the many I've left off.

Tomb Raider

Dave Halverson
Under the Influence

First-Gen

8-bit In the beginning...

...There was, Atari. I remember the night I got my first game console (a shiny Atari 5200) like it was 22 years ago because all I can remember (like it was yesterday) is thinking how cool it was to have Pac-Man at home... and I never really liked Pac-Man, in fact, I kinda hate it. The first time I put in Buck Rogers: Planet of Zoom, however, I felt like freakin' Neo, and The Matrix wasn't even invented yet. Robotron 2084, Gyruss, Dig Dug, Joust, and Pole Position only took me so far though. After too many broken controllers and crappy games, by '84 my video game fascination was fading fast; and by the time the Nintendo Entertainment System finally showed up to save us in '85 it was on life support. Tainted and confused, I bought the NES for the Robot, which I tried once, got very confused, and then became so addicted to Tennis, Ice Climber, and Excitebike, I'm not even sure where it went.

Nintendo Entertainment System

I knew the day I got it home that the NES would change everything, but the game that made me a gamer for life was Metroid. Mario was a chubby goof, but this spaceman was k-e-w-l. And then it happened; off came the helmet. Chalk up addiction number 2: Female leads.

Sega Master System

The Master System had little to no effect on me until '88. I couldn't stand pressing up on the D-Pad to jump, and it was rampant. But everything changed in 1988, one of the best and most pivotal years in video game history. While genre-defining future classics were piling up on NES, all I needed from Sega was Phantasy Star, and the Sega Scope 3D glasses along with Zaxxon 3D, Outrun 3D, Space Harrier 3D and a little game called Maze Hunter 3D. That had such a profound impact on me, it's never been more than an arm's reach away since. In fact...I better not.

Most influential 8-Bit:
GAMES:
NES: Metroid, Blaster Master, Castlevania & Castlevania II: Simon's Quest, Ninja Gaiden & Ninja Gaiden II, Bionic Commando, The Legend of Zelda, Metal Gear, Mega Man, Fester's Quest, Super-C, Bayou Billy, Battletoads.
Sega Master System: Phantasy Star, Maze Hunter 3D
DEVELOPER: Nintendo
Point of interest: I hated Mario. He was uncool to a degree that actually made me angry.
First Generation Hero: Gunpei Yokoi (Metroid)
Coolest Innovation: Sega Scope 3D Glasses

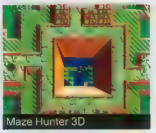
Second-Gen

16-bit: Double the bits, triple the fun!

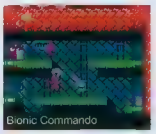
The leap from 8 to 16-bit was so dramatic I quit my job, borrowed some money and got into the industry. It was either that or move back in with my parents, forever, because I couldn't stop, and haven't since. 8-bit was no contest, but Sega struck first this round and although the Genesis was the weaker of the two consoles, it was also the easiest for developers to bend to their will. With each passing cycle studios like Shiny, Konami, Climax, GameArts, Capcom, Traveller's Tales, Sega, Core, Virgin, Interplay, and especially Treasure kept finding ways to get more out of Sega's 16-bit workhorse.
Try as they might however, Nintendo's lead seemed insurmountable until that fateful CES when Sonic stole Mario's thunder. Finally! A mascot for the rest of us! I'll never forget the day Sonic the Hedgehog propelled the Genesis past the SNES. It was fleeting—Sega abused the power almost immediately—but it changed the industry forever. The TurboGrafx/PC Engine was a great system too, and the first with a CD-ROM drive. If you were lucky enough, you managed to grab a Neo Geo too, although the games were so expensive, few did. Having a shop definitely had its advantages.

Most influential 16-Bit:
GAMES:
Genesis/Mega Drive: Earthworm Jim, Gunstar Heroes, Ranger X, Strider Hiryuu, Sonic the Hedgehog, Dynamite Headdy, Castlevania Bloodlines, Earnest Evans, Alicia Dragoon, Monster World IV & V, Flink, Crusader of Centy, El Viento, Panorama Cotton, Phantasy Star 2 & IV, Beyond Oasis, Shining in the Darkness, Revenge of Shinobi, Atomic Robo Kid, Thunderforce IV, E-Swat, Vectorman, Ren & Stimpy: Stimpy's Invention, Comix Zone, Contra: Hard Corps, Quackshot starring Donald Duck, Sparkster, Bare

Sega Scope 3D Glasses


Maze Hunter 3D

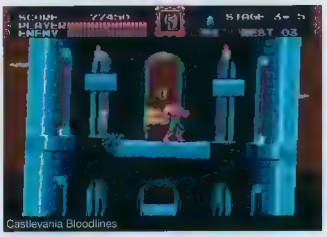
Blaster Master


Bionic Commando

Ranger-X

Zelda: A Link to the Past

Shining in the Darkness


Castlevania Bloodlines

"I'll never forget the day Sonic the Hedgehog propelled the Genesis past the SNES."

Wonderdog

Dynamite Headdy

Earthworm Jim

Knuckle II, Tinhead, Virtua Racing, Zombies Ate My Neighbors, Cool Spot, Chuck Rock, Chuck Rock II: Son of Chuck, Dashin' Desperadoes, Sunset Riders, Decap Attack, Disney's Aladdin, Disney's The Jungle Book, Castle of Illusion starring Mickey Mouse, Alien Soldier, Batman (Jpn, small box), Magical Taruruuto-kun, Taz-Mania, Mamono Hunter Yohko: Dai-7 no Keishou, Michael Jackson's Moonwalker

Sega CD: Wonderdog, Silpheed, Import Sonic CD, Aisle Lord, Flink, Keio Flying Squadron, Lunar: The Silver Star, Popful Mail: Magical Fantasy Adventure, The Terminator

SNES/Super Famicom: Starfox, Super Castlevania IV, The Legend of Zelda: Link to the Past, Super Metroid, Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts, Cybernator, Super Mario Kart, Super Mario RPG Legend of the Seven Stars, Actraiser 2, Alien 3, Axelay, Battletoads in Battlemaniacs, Stunt Race FX, Donkey Kong Country, Killer Instinct, Lagoon, Soul Blazer, Nosferatu, Super Adventure Island, Super Mario World, Super Mario Word 2: Yoshi's Island, Super Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back, Super Turrican 2

TurboGrafx: Air Zonk, Alien and Devil's Crush, Bonk's Adventure, Bonk's Revenge, Dead Moon, Keith Courage in Alpha Zones, Ninja Spirit, Super Star Soldier

Turbo CD: Spriggan Mark 2: Re Terraform Project, Y's III Wanderers from Ys
Dungeon Explorer II

Neo Geo: Magician Lord, Nam-1975, Cyber-Lip, Metal Slug, Super 8 Man, Mutation Nation, Blue's Journey

DEVELOPERS: Shiny Entertainment, Treasure, Rare, Climax (Japan), Sega Japan, Capcom, Konami, Core, GameArts, Nintendo

Point of Interest: CES (like E3 only much cooler and in Vegas/Chicago) was open to the public one day per show and took place twice a year. And get this; the press had direct access and the game developers decided on their game's coverage! Imagine that! Choosing the magazine their game identified with! Madness! They didn't even send their game to amateurs to get crucified! Pft, man how could they be so blind?

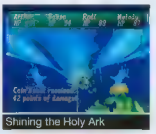
Second Generation Hero: David Perry

Coolest Innovation: Nintendo FX Chip

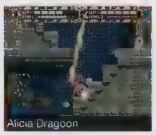
Crash Bandicoot

Landstalker

Jet Force Gemini


Shining the Holy Ark

BUG!


Alicia Dragoon

Mischief Makers

Battletoads in Battlemaniacs

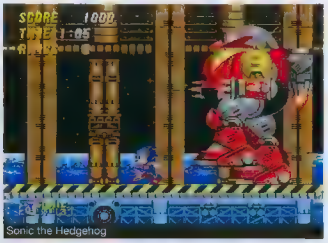
"The 700 dollar, 32-bit Panasonic 3DO landed with a resounding thud just in time to double as a spare coffee table."

Third-Gen:

32/64-Bit Welcome to Project Mayhem

Fasten your seat belts and put your tray tables in the upright position, the game industry will now go temporarily insane.

Dateline September 1993:
Conceived by the founder of EA, Trip the light fantastic Hawkins, the 700 dollar, 32-bit Panasonic 3DO landed with a resounding thud just in time to double as a spare coffee table for the holidays, but its ample muscle never stood a chance against the likes of Sega and Nintendo's 16-bit armies. The price was just too high and strong 3rd party support never materialized. Three years and two million consoles later, it was all over, but it was mildly entertaining while it lasted thanks to Crystal Dynamics, EA, and a few stragglers like Naughty Dog, who made their first game, Way of the Warrior (a hilarious MK clone with a White Zombie soundtrack) using digitized tenants from their apartment building. Gone but not forgotten (because they'd all enjoy new life on better systems, 'cept for Quasar) are: Road Rash, Off World Interceptor, Captain Quasar, Crash 'n Burn, Gex, The Horde, Solar Eclipse, and Total Eclipse.


Sonic the Hedgehog

Guardian Heroes

Dateline November 1993:
We had to fly to New York in the pouring rain, but wild dogs couldn't keep us away from Atari's Jaguar launch party where slinky girls dressed as cats rubbed up against us as we grabbed our debug system and caught the red eye to get back to the office and watch in horror as Trevor McFur putted through the 64-bit Crescent Galaxy like a Monty Python skit. I liked Cybermorph (a lot, must have been the coffee) but over the next few years the Jaguar would be the source of mostly pain and ridicule. I don't think Tom & Jerry were ever properly introduced. Over its lifetime the Jaguar delivered eight good games: AVP, Tempest 2000, 2 Cybermorphs, Rayman, Iron Soldier, Doom, and Wolfenstein…out of around 80.

Dateline November 1994:
Sega Japan proposes an interim console to keep fans honest until the Saturn arrives, and mistakenly lets SoA run with it, resulting in a rushed 32-bit add-on that rides piggy back on the Genesis, and a bunch of horribly rushed games to assure it tanks extra hard...which it does in record time of course, with the Sega Saturn launch less than eight…no, make that four months away.

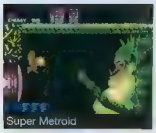
Dateline May 11, 1995:
Sega makes BIG mistake number two and seals its fate forever by releasing the Saturn four months earlier than previously announced, and adds insult to injury by limiting it to "select" retailers, burning the likes of Wal-Mart and others (who never carry it as a result), not to mention all of the 3rd parties whose games were planned for September. The result? Crappy launch with no games at 100 bucks more than PlayStation. And we owe it all to Bernie! We knew Sega was in trouble when Tom Kalinske left, but it takes effort to orchestrate a screw up of this magnitude. Fortunately, Nintendo made Sony so angry the year before with the whole disc

Zelda: Ocarina of Time

Gunstar Heroes

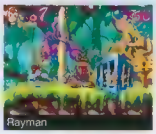
Wario Land Virtual Boy

Castlevania: SoTN


Super Metroid

Tomb Raider

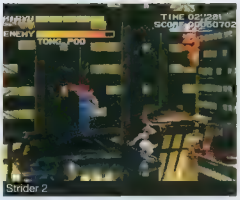
Chaotix


Rayman

Sin & Punishment

Astal

Clockwork Knight


Strider 2

debacle that the PlayStation was born (thanks to Ken Kutaragi) and kicked the Saturn to the curb. The world's 64-bit system chimed in last, heavily restricted by the cartridge format Nintendo held on to for dear life one generation too long.

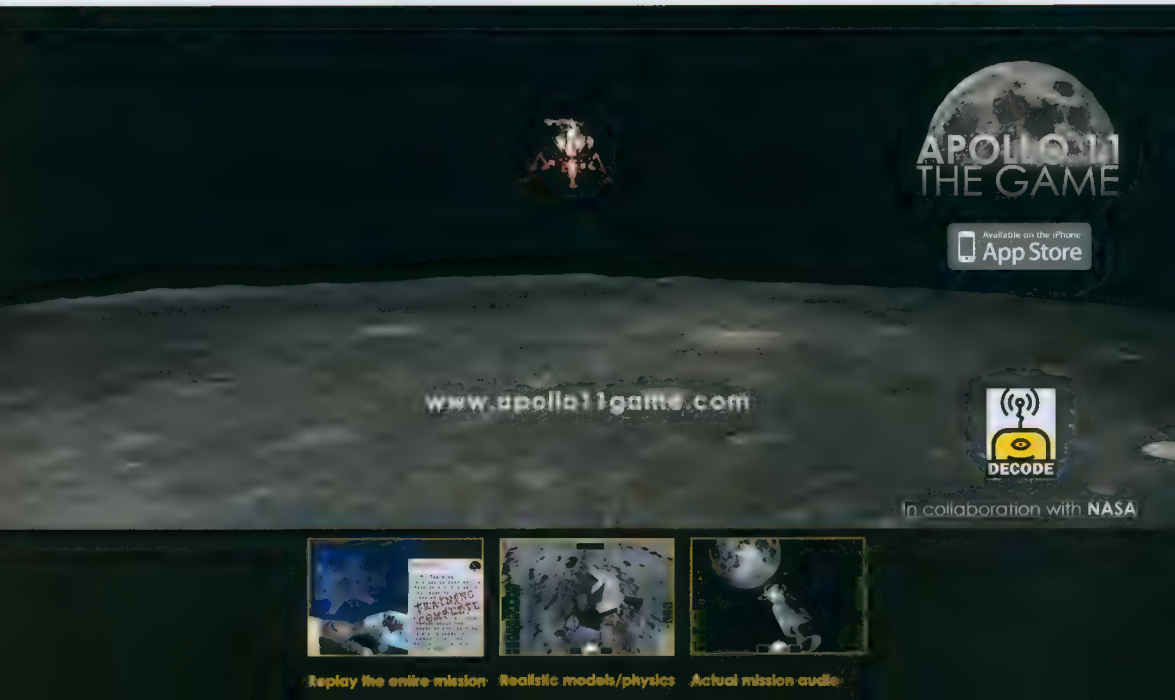
Dateline August 11, 1995:
Gunpei Yokoi's latest invention and possibly his best, the Virtual Boy, is met with a lukewarm response (by Nintendo standards) and is doomed from the start, even though there was a much improved version in the offing, as Mr. Yokoi was told to wrap it up so the company could focus on the release of the Nintendo 64. Shunned by the company he helped build, Mr. Yokoi left Nintendo and moved to Bandai to work on the Wonder Swan. He was killed in a freak car accident the following year. The forthcoming games we played at the CES that year were simply in a league by themselves. It's a crime that nobody would ever see them again, or what this amazing machine

Dark Savior

could really do. I got my Wario though!! Rest in Peace Mr.Yokoi. We miss you! As far as "influence" goes, this 3rd generation, for me, was defined by the developers that managed to somehow innovate like never before amid all this nonsense, and the treasures left behind by its one-legged step children like the Jaguar, 32-X, Virtual Boy, 3DO, and especially the Saturn. Sega had such momentum before Bernie declared war on RPGs and side-scrollers and pretty much hosed us all. Peter Moore would soon save the day though. Well…almost.

Most Influential 32-64 bit: Sega Saturn: Clockwork Knight 1&2, Astal, Guardian Heroes, Keio Flying Squadron 2, Magic Knight Rayerath, Panzer Dragoon Zwei and Saga, Dark Savior, Princess Crown, Shining the Holy Ark, Silhouette Mirage, Shining Wisdom, Skeleton Warriors, Psychic Assassin Toromaru, Super Tempo, Tryrush Deppy, Bug, Gex
PlayStation: Castlevania: Symphony of the Night, MediEvil, Loaded, Brave Fencer Musashi, Blood Omen: Leacy of Kain, Ape Escape, Assault Riggs, Crash Bandicoot, FF VII, FF IX, Ghost in the Shell, Einhander, Philosoma, Thousand Arms, Jumping Flash, Wild Arms 2, Strider 2, Warhawk, Vagrant Story, Motor Toon Grand Prix, Tomba, Tomba 2, Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver, Skullmonkeys, Wild 9, Legend of Dragoon, C-12: Final Resistance, Jet Moto, Fear Effect

Nintendo 64: Jet Force Gemini, Mischief Makers, Super Mario 64, Banjo-Kazooie & Tooie, Earthworm Jim 3D, Donkey Kong 64, Paper Mario, Rocket Robot on Wheels, Starfox 64, The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time & Majora's Mask, Tonic Trouble, Conker's Bad Fur Day, Wave Race 64, Yoshi's Story, Mario Kart 64, Ki Gold
Virtual Boy: Wario Land, Red Alarm, Vertical Force
DEVELOPERS: Rare, Sega AM7 (Overworks), Treasure, Climax (Japan), SCEJ, SCEE (Cambridge Studios), Square, Capcom, Konami, GameArts, Nintendo
Point of interest: The 32-X add-on was originally sketched out on a cocktail napkin in Vegas, which explains a lot. Superman and Bubsy 3D redefined shit games
3rd Generation Hero: Rare & Gunpei Yokoi
Coolest Innovation: Virtual Boy
To be continued...



System: PS3, Xbox 360 | Developer: A2M | Publisher: Bethesda | Available: Sept. 8

WET

It's time to get nice and WET

words Dave Halverson

"She's a shoot first and, well, there's never anyone left alive to ask questions later."

Back at the Boneyard: Rubi gets some housework done.

The first time I saw WET back in May of last year, I thought I had it all figured out. At a glance everything about it, even the name, seems obvious… Sexy female gunslinger, grindhouse veneer, bullet time, acrobatics…okay, so, it's Stranglehold meets Max Payne and they're gonna sex it up; awesome! It was also nice to see Artificial Mind & Movement (a.k.a. A2M) at the helm of their own game. I've always held them in high regard, but as big as they are, they've never created an original IP. When you can crank out quality E licenses and ports the way they can, mega corps like Disney, Activision and THQ back up their trucks and time flies when you're knee deep in multiple projects. Once upon a time WET was part of the best lineup Vivendi Universal Games ever had, and then well, everyone knows the rest. I'm here to talk about the gameplay which it turns out I didn't have all figured out. What might seem obvious at a glance becomes anything but by the time Rubi takes her first shot of whiskey, and then heaves the bottle high and puts a bullet through it. Heck of a way to power a girl up.

Rubi's certainly easy on the eyes, and sexy in her own special way. But she's really all about the job…and

of course, the money. Rubi's a "fixer," as in, you got a problem and enough cash, she'll fix it. And she takes her work very seriously. She's a shoot first and, well, there's never anyone left alive to ask questions later. It's her silhouette that fools you. Up close, the pants are camos, she's wearing a tank under that crop vest (and it's probably blood stained) and dog tags around her neck…she's not big on makeup either. As for the grindhouse veneer; there's definitely a layer of grime, but it's mixed with spaghetti (with extra sauce) and '70s TV-style cheese. So it's ultra-violent and over the top but with a heavy-duty story and a sense of humor. It's not as scripted or restrictive as your typical cinematic game either—although it does contain set pieces along those lines—and the bullet time is an altogether new-fangled beast.

WET is unique in its presentation and execution; something of a hybrid of a hybrid if you will. After playing through the four levels seared onto the DVD Bethesda so graciously provided, I can tell you one thing—it's all kinds of fun. I must have played each one half a dozen times. The bullet time, gunplay, sword play and acrobatics are all fused in WET. There's no gauge to run down or ammo to run over; starting out with her dual pistols Rubi can straddle, fold back and let fly sliding down ladders, wall run, slide, and jump, and every time she does bullet time is engaged; it's nearly wall to wall. The only time Rubi isn't in slo-mo is when she's slashing with her sword (although bullet time applies to the sword later) or running towards or up a wall, ramp, or rail getting lined up for her next assault. There are plenty of outdoor areas too where Rubi gets a chance to use her athleticism for platforming purposes but otherwise engaging the enemy is a technique unto itself. Whipping off of a parallel bar 20 feet in the air, unloading round after round as you slowly

descend, blood spurting and arms and legs snapping and folding, is a total rush, especially when the second you land you can link another move instantly using the environment or not, although the better the performance the greater the reward. Consecutive kills increase the score multiplier and chaining acrobatic maneuvers racks up style points, so it's not just about killing—it's about how good you look killing, and A2M have rigged each area with myriad ways to kill thine enemies, and plenty of upgrades to reap your just rewards. Use thugs to kill more thugs with the Human Wall Run or Rebound, upgrade a Slash to brandish your sword in bullet time and gut or decapitate the enemy, shoot while swinging on poles, zip lines or ledges; there's much for the taking, and upgrading. A2M's targeting system is really the

"WET isn't just an acrobatic shooter though; the slick as greased lighting presentation never stops..."

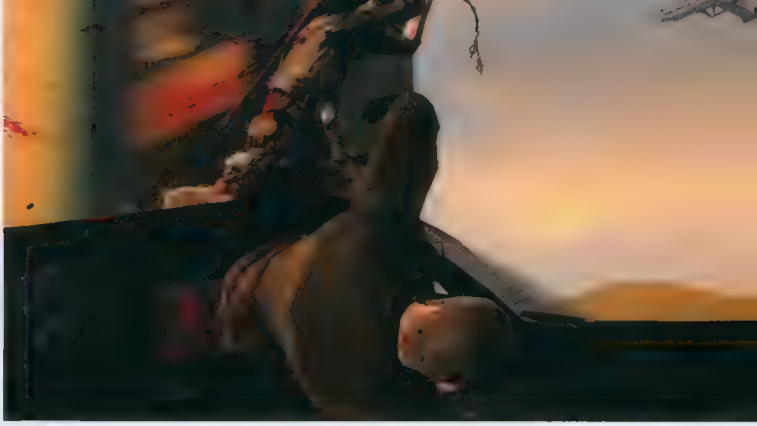
secret. Bullet time as we've come to know it is limited and stiff. But not when you get WET. Dual wielding, the auto lock targets the closest enemy while the other hand/reticule is free to aim at will, offering an amazing range of motion and freedom to orchestrate spectacular kills. As long as Rubi's in bullet time she can target anyone in her vicinity; there's animation for every angle imaginable. If it bleeds, she can kill it.

WET isn't just an acrobatic shooter though; the slick-as-greased-lighting presentation never stops, splicing in ultra-cool Quick Time surprises and Guy Ritchie-style story segues. Each scenario is varied by location (spread over three continents) and design. Within the span of four levels I experienced open air panoramas, dimly lit corridors and back alleys, a parking garage, a meat locker, an outdoor shopping precinct, a sun (and landmine) drenched beach, several areas in the Far East, and of course Rubi's humble abode. The B52 Bomber Rubi lives in comes with a big (scrap) yard, filled with bonus obstacles and shooting challenges, and if that gets old there's a strip club across the street (not included). The highlight reel of my introduction to the wild-wild WET however, was definitely the famed freeway chase...without a car. Now this is the kind of Quick Time I can get behind. Flipping and vaulting between fast moving trucks and cars in heavy traffic, the prompts aren't so quick that you can't enjoy the view and there's nearly constant user controlled shooting. It's an amazing ride with a killer conclusion. This is why I prefer female characters. There's nothing exploitive or overtly "sexy" about it; a dude just can't make these moves.

What I did see and hear of the story, the writing (penned by *24* scribe Duppy Demitrius) was excellent and Eliza Dukshu seems right at home in Rubi's thick skin. Hey, maybe we'll see a little Rubi action in *Dollhouse*. The music is appropriately raunchy too. All that's left now is for A2M to button it up nice and tight. Dial in the dynamic collision, tweak the physics, and swat the bugs as they've come to do so well. I have a feeling WET is going to have that extra little something on it too, although it might be a little tough to make out under all that blood.

INTERVIEW

Patrick Fortier, Creative Director



play: Although you're the largest independent studio in Canada if I'm not mistaken, WET is your first original IP. After all this time, what lead you to a Tarantino-esque cinematic action game starring the most down and dirty, take-no-prisoners heroine anyone has ever seen?
Even though Artificial Mind and Movement is known more for its family-oriented titles, through the years a lot of its employees have longed to work on a more "gamer's" game. As A2M enjoyed commercial success with a lot of its products, it decided to re-invest a lot of those revenues internally in order to expand its horizons and ultimately provide the opportunity many people had been waiting for. Along with a strong team of veteran A2M employees, the new project also attracted many new faces who had worked in other companies such as Ubisoft Montreal, Bioware or EA, so it gave the project a strong mix of old and new members.

WET was a real leap of faith for the company because everything had to be started from scratch. Work started on establishing a new franchise, defining a gameplay recipe with ingredients nobody had ever combined before and building an engine from the ground up to accommodate it all. That's a lot of stuff to sharpen your teeth on! While the original vision for the game was always to make an "acrobatic shooter"(i.e., a game that would combine high-flying acrobatics and high body count shooting action) the world of WET only really started evolving after Rubi came to life.

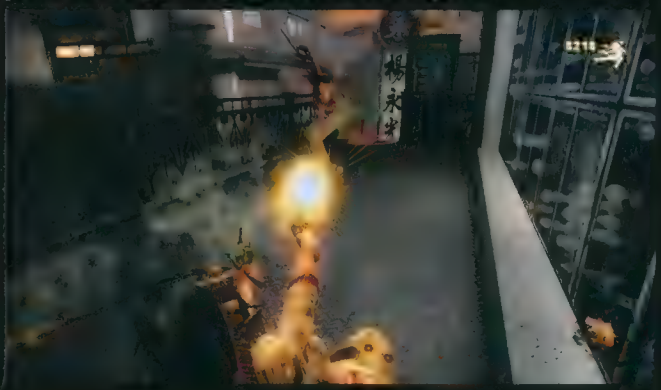
Rubi has a very iconic look, you can recognize her just by looking at her silhouette; long hair, dual guns, the hilt of a sword over her shoulders. She really set the tone for the universe and storyline and the whole "grindhouse meets spaghetti western" vibe of the title. We wanted the game to stand out and have a distinctive flavor, but we also wanted to have fun and not take ourselves too seriously, so we strove for that nice ironic mix of violence and humor. We were also inspired by the high energy and over-the-top fight sequences seen in movies like Kill Bill or Desperado. The high number of enemies, the crazy stylish stunt shooting or swordplay, and the high tempo of the fights are all things we felt hadn't really been done justice in video games. There's lots of games with action of course, but the fluid mix of guns, acrobatics and sword, played out in an uninterrupted flow of combat using walls and rebounds and slides and continuous movement, that's not something that I've seen before and I think it's something we truly managed to capture in WET.

What do you consider the most critical aspects of designing a video game heroine with the legs to launch a franchise and perhaps cross over into a film or two of her very own?
One of the most important points for me is that if you want to think "franchise," then you need to think about a universe and you need to give it mythos. When I look at Rubi and when I play WET, I really feel like the universe is bigger than what I see in the game. Rubi has a lot of contacts, she has a clear history (her clothes, where she lives, etc.), the villains are bigger than life, some of them have grudges with Rubi already, I feel like things are happening beyond the scope of the game. Even when I've finished playing, I could easily imagine going back into that universe and doing other things, there are still mysteries I want resolved, questions I want answered and characters I want to see developed. And most of all, there's a longing for the particular "flavor" of the franchise. In our case, it's that contemporary take on the cheesy '70s action movies We've created a timeless place where old 8-track cassette tapes meet cell phones and where you can really just enjoy a simple old-school kind of fun.

If you could choose any actress to play Rubi, who would it be?
To be honest, I think we already have the best Rubi we could hope for with Eliza Dushku, who does the voice-over for Rubi. I think she would be great at playing her in a live-action context as well. We've had many people asking us if we had modeled Rubi after her because they really see a resemblance there!

How did Eliza Dushku become the voice of Rubi?
As far as I remember, Eliza was on the top of a short list of names we were interested in contacting to play Rubi back in the Vivendi days of the project. She was really inspired by the script and I think there was an immediate connection with the character of Rubi because she's this tough, "Clint Eastwood" sort of character with a no-nonsense attitude, but who really doesn't just rely on her sex appeal to get things done. Rubi's got a real "blue-collar" flavor that I think appealed to Eliza because it makes her much more relatable than most typical video-game characters.

"When I look at Rubi and when I play WET, I really feel like the universe is bigger than what I see in the game."



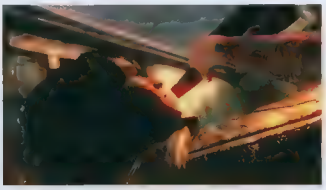
Rubi lives in a gutted B52 bomber, curses like a sailor, and drinks whiskey to replenish her energy… not your ordinary video game heroine and certainly long overdue. Does she push the envelope in any ways we don't know about? I remember some concept art with a shower.
In terms of pushing the envelope, let's just say Rubi is really intense on the job, so she has her own particular techniques for getting information out of people. And I'm not talking "Jack Bauer" style here, her methods are a lot more expeditious… As far as a shower scene goes, well, there is an old cast-iron bath in her boneyard and the producer doesn't like good assets to go to waste, so you never know. I doubt she'd have any time to relax before the end of the game though…

The second act, barreling down the freeway guns blazing, vaulting from car to car is the best use of quick time I've experienced and one adrenaline rush of a level. Are there any more like it?
We're really happy with the "car-hopping" sequence and yes, there are a couple more sequences like that in the game. The idea was to create a different gameplay that would change the pace for players, but not be out of character for Rubi. We didn't want her piloting a submarine in the deep blue sea all of a sudden or anything, so the scenes really pertain to the story and play to Rubi's strengths.

Although Rubi's a fixer for hire, does WET have a central villain or organization? Is it comprised of separate episodes or one continuous story arc?
WET's story is one continuous story arc. The central villain and organization are introduced early on, but as is often the case in such stories, things are not as they seem. Rubi gets caught in the middle of two rival organizations and she has to find a way to stay alive. Things eventually get a bit more personal for Rubi, so revenge becomes an important theme near the end of the game.

Have you wrestled with Rubi's physics in terms how sexy she should look?
To be honest, that's a whole facet of our main character that we really haven't spent a lot of time on. We never wanted to show her in a gratuitous way and we really didn't want her to be seen as this kind of sex-object female heroine. The idea behind having a woman as a main character was to promote acrobatics and provide a clear message of movement and fluidity. She looks fast, she looks agile and you don't feel like charging headfirst into enemies when you're controlling a character like that. The rest of Rubi's attitude lends itself well to the kind of game we wanted to make, but (and I know that might sound clichéd) I really feel that Rubi's strong personality transcends her look.

Following the acquisition, did the development continue while you hunted for a new publisher?
Even during the whole Vivendi/Activision merger, we never stopped working on the game. We were very fortunate in this situation since A2M actually decided to buy back the rights altogether in order to be able to take its time finding just the right publisher. This means we never had to stop working on the project or downsize the team or anything. A2M really showed a lot of conviction in the title and in the team and that meant they wanted to find someone who shared this same level of passion for the game and who understood where we were trying to go with it. The great thing about working with Bethesda is that we really get to exchange with them and they have a lot of time to give us. We're not just number 99 of 300 products they are bringing out this year. Communication is great with them and their experience bringing games to market is really crucial to us at this point in development.



"Let's just say Rubi is really intense on the job, so she has her own particular techniques for getting information out of people."

INTERVIEW

These guys are all **WET**

Idle chatter with: Patrick Fortier, Creative Director / Ashraf Ismail, Lead Game Designer / Jean-Francois Mignault, Art Director / Lorne Nudel Lead Animator / Levon Louis, Audio Director

play: What does your job entail, and what are you most proud of respective to your contribution?
Patrick: I came on as Creative Director for WET nearly two years ago. I fell in love with Rubi immediately and felt the game had tremendous potential. However, at the time, I thought we needed to find a better focus for the game in order to unify the intentions and the delivery means. I really felt the old "'70s action movie meets Spaghetti western" flavor needed to be emphasized more and should transpire in everything we did. I also wanted the game to be more action-oriented than it was at the time, because that's where I find it really stands out. It's not about puzzles and exploration; it's about taking down a whole slew of guys while performing death-defying acrobatics. Another important thing for me was to make sure STYLE equaled EFFICIENCY for players. That's why the autolock only kicks in while performing acrobatics, along with the slow-motion, and why Rubi only shoots with one gun if she's just walking along on the ground. Beyond the score and the HUD, I wanted players to immediately feel more powerful while in acrobatics to the point where they wouldn't even want to even try and play any other way.
Ashraf: As Lead Game Designer my responsibilities revolve around the need to design towards the vision we have aimed for and using that to deliver a fun, enjoyable experience for the player. Vague enough for you?
Specifically speaking, I am more focused on the mechanics of the game. I have to make sure that everything fits the vision, fits the experience we want to deliver and is something that players will really enjoy and get satisfaction out of. I am directly responsible for Rubi's controls/moves and the combat system
I am very proud that we have come up with a new way of playing a shooter game. Pulling off acrobatics,

"The idea behind having a woman as a main character was to promote acrobatics and provide a clear message of movement and fluidity..."

"At one point during development we had a Johnny Cash song (Ring of Fire) in Rubi's boneyard."

split-targeting, the sword, all in one cohesive system... it was really hard to pull off! There are a lot of technical reasons that this hasn't been done before but we've done a great job with it and ultimately it gives WET a unique edge.

Jean-Francois: As Art Director of the project and one of the initial creators of WET; I basically gave birth to Rubi. I conceptualized many designs myself to establish what I had in mind for the world of WET, but had to start with our girl, since I wanted Rubi to influence the world in which she was going to evolve and not vice versa. Had to say the inspiration was spontaneous, she appeared on my screen in less than a week, avoiding the usual nine months of pain. From the moment she saw the light of day it was so clear to me what WET would look like, from her harsh enemies like Tarantula and Ze Kollektor to her Boneyard hideout, the look of WET would then become the inspiration for its storyline. Stylization of WET was an important aspect for me— it makes our game stand out from our competition, so I pushed to give WET this '70s Drive-in B movie treatment which helps in supporting the timeless feel I was looking for. Later on I surrounded myself with a talented team of illustrators with whom I went on a creative rampage, coming up with wild and eccentric ideas of places and situations in which Rubi would later evolve.

Lorne: As lead animator, I tried to ensure that we struck the best balance between responsive character control, and exceptional, human-motion quality, all the while being true to the vision of who Rubi is. I think we were very successful.

Levon: As the Audio Director for WET, I have managed the conception, creation, and integration of everything the player hears, from music to sound effects and voice recordings. The music is something we gave a lot of love to, since it would bring the most "style points" to the table for a title which is all about style.

What's your favorite aspect or element of the game?

Patrick: I love Rubi as a character and I feel really inspired by the contemporary "grindhouse" universe we've created, but I think one particular aspect that really stands out for me is the dual targeting mechanic. We really went through a whole bunch of iterations before hitting on it, but in the end it just felt so simple and so natural. I find it's a really elegant piece of game design because it's such an intuitive extension of the camera controls and it adds so much depth to the game. It allows us to keep the benefits of autolock, which I feel is really important in a game like this because if the shooting is too difficult to perform, you really discourage players from trying complicated acrobatic sequences, but still allows players to work for a secondary target of their choosing. This means the shooting is always rewarding and never gratuitous because you can always do more, pull off a better shot, and work at improving your skills. You get the immediate gratification of a kill in the first few seconds of play, but you also enjoy the more long-term rewards of consecutive headshots.

Ashraf: Moving through the single player game and seeing the wildly different environments is a lot of fun. Rubi gets into a lot of crazy situations and there are some really funny moments, some really overly intense gameplay moments

On a game mechanics level, I love running around with Rubi and trying to find new ways of using the environment and chaining Rubi's moves. Rubi's Boneyard is an awesome playground. There are some really fun environment challenges. Right now on the dev team, we're playing these challenges and attempting to beat each other's times. It's really gratifying and just a ton of fun.

Jean: In terms of personal satisfaction, I have to say that my favorite element of WET is the Rage mode, for many reasons. First and foremost because it emphasized the uniqueness of WET visually, also it is the ultimate moment in the game where you really feel Rubi's intensity, the rage mode is where the player will really feel how powerful our girl really is. The recipe of Rage Mode went through a lot of technical challenges, from accelerating the paste, the 2D tricolor look to splattering bloody words on the walls like "Pain and Die" and much more, all leading to what is a well-suited title that is RAGE MODE.

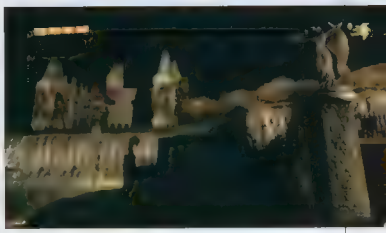
Lorne: My favorite element of the game is the fluidity of Rubi's acrobatic moves and the ability to link so many cinematic kills. That, to me, is fun all the way through the game.

Levon: I love the quiet coolness, with a blend of humor and violence that makes me feel like the first time I watched Pulp Fiction.

Anything on the cutting room floor you wish weren't?

Patrick: At one point during development we had a Johnny Cash song ("Ring of Fire") in Rubi's boneyard and since I really like Johnny Cash I was really sad to see it go. I enjoyed loading up that map sometimes just to run around and listen to it with no particular objective in mind. Having said that, we replaced it with something really good and fitting, so it was probably for the best.

Go ahead...make her day.



Ashraf: There are some really great characters and moments that didn't make it into the game. Ah well, maybe one day someone will figure out how to create a game similar to one they've already created but with a different story, new and interesting uses of the core mechanics and some cool new features. We'd be able to bring these things back to life. One can dream.
Jean: We initially came up with a wild storyline that would have made the world of WET even more colorful and unique, but it was wisely decided, since WET is Artificial Mind and Movement's first game of this kind, to play it safer than the first intended concept, that would have had generated strong reactions but unpredictable ones and unpredictable is much more tolerated in a sequel of a successful title. So no worries since the success of WET will open the doors for those wilder concepts.
Lorne: Of course, but that's in the nature of collaborative development. Overall I'm extremely proud of the decisions we made.
Levon: I wanted to work with a few famous musicians that expressed interest in the title, but there wasn't time… maybe for WET 2!

Give us one big idea for the sequel…
Patrick: We definitely learned a lot making WET and there are a whole slew of ideas still in our heads. One of the tenets of the game was connectivity of moves in order to have really fluid fast-paced acrobatic action. Rubi blends from one action to another without stopping and once you unlock all of Rubi's moves you can shoot anytime, anywhere, from ANY position (ledge, pole, ladders, etc). For a sequel, I think we might want to go even further in that direction in terms of connections and flexibility of navigation so that you could maybe clear out a whole building without ever setting foot on the ground!
Ashraf: We're playing around with a cool story idea Rubi will be searching for a Crystal Skull that just happens to be a link to an ancient alien race. She won't use her guns but there will be a vine swinging, monkey chase sequence. I know… already sounds like a winner.
Jean:I will be brief since I don't want to spoil it. What I have in mind for WET 2 is resumed in two words. Hallucinations and Morphing in game
Lorne: No!
Levon:We reveal that Rubi is really a man!

Why should everyone get WET this September?
Patrick: I think if you want to experience a fresh new take on the old-school action-shooting genre set in a really stylized universe filled with blind albino assassins, midget torturers and crazy death-defying acrobatic sequences, then you'll really enjoy WET!
Ashraf: WET is a different spin on shooters. It has a ton of style, really awesome gameplay moments and a unique flavor. Above all it's a really fun experience that people are really gonna get a kick out of….
Lorne: It's fun. Who wants to miss out on fun?
Jean: The journey, the crazy eclectic ride we are offering the gamers, the non-stop intense action with no time to take your breath, being in control of an anti-heroine as badass as they come. WET will lead you to unpredictable places, it will make you face funky and exotic characters bringing you the feeling of being the main act of an action B-Movie style straight from the '70s.
Levon: WET is raw, WET is fun, WET has swords and guns!

Shadow Com

It's alive...

words Brady Fiechter

Super Metroid was an awesome game. Super Metroid is still an awesome game. Super Metroid will be an awesome game years from now, because it is a classic. It is timeless. It is projecting ideas that will always be relevant, embodying a craft and soul that will forever deserve deconstruction.

"Super Metroid was just so, so awesome," agrees Donald Mustard, creative director of the XBLA action-adventure known as Shadow Complex.

"When we all sat down as a team, we were in the unique situation where we could really make whatever we wanted," says Mustard. "We cut our teeth on Undertow, we were comfortable with our [illegible] and many, many games; we decided that, collectively, one of our favorite games ever made was Super Metroid."

Prepare yourself, nostalgic gamers of old, ye who understand the messianic power source of Samus Aran. The name Super Metroid is about to be dropped at a record pace. It was meant to be: someone finally realized it was time to dive head first into the creative well of planet Zebes.

"We love Super Metroid," muses Mustard. "This game *is* a genre. How has this not been exploited more? We thought if we could make any game, we would make a next-gen Metroid game. Super Metroid came out in 1994, and the next year the PlayStation came out, and everything was 3D, 3D, 3D. And we just went away from what we consider to be the height of 2D game design. And we thought, what if we could rip 2D game design into the 3D generation, what if we could take the best of what was in Metroid and fuse it with modern graphics and physics and AI and even some of the modern design sensibilities that we've learned over the last 15 years? So that's what Shadow Complex is. It's our Metroid; it's what we love making and it's what we love playing."

> "These are the quintessential games. It's what spoke to me as a kid, it still speaks to me now." Donald Mustard

Video games are great, but let's be honest: don't you sometimes want to put down the controller and grab your G.I. Joes instead? Now there's the definition of "awesome." The only pressing problem is that most of us outgrew bit past the age where it's OK to make explosion noises and push plastic military vehicles across shag carpet. Instead, we go to the theater, where it's far more OK to get our prey fix and watch giant robots and tanks duke it out for galactic supremacy.

"But come on, seriously, how cool were G.I. Joes!" adds Mustard. "We started talking about G.I. Joe in our early meetings, and how much as kids we all loved G.I. Joe. And now much we love the dichotomy between Cobra—the super high-tech bad guys versus just a good old [illegible] was really cool was [illegible] villain versus this mo

CHAIR

The shadow complex, in many ways, is the main character.

plex

Notice the unusual amount of depth in the plane. While you are on a strict 2D line of movement, the game is focusing on bringing resistance in from far off in the plane, creating volume and dynamics. The use of lightning and other tricks also fleshes out the feeling that you are in a real world, as much visually as in the level design that takes you through that world.

low-tech good guy. And we thought, what if we could make a more grown up, more realistic, more well-thought-out version of G.I. Joe? What would that bad guy look like? As we sat down, we discussed, if you look at a lot of popular media today, we don't have really great bad guys. Look at Nazis, they make really good bad guys. They're just really awesome to hate. They look cool and do horrible things and people just love to kill Nazis. Russia made a good bad guy. Big and powerful and gonna destroy the world. Terrorists are fine, they don't make that great of a bad guy. They're not this great big epic threat. They're just different. So we thought, how can we create the next cool bad guy? And the more we thought about it, the more we were like, it's not gonna be Russia, China—could be— but then we thought, what if we make America into the next huge bad guy? And so we started to think about that, and that point we started to talk to [novelist] Orson Scott Card about it as well. And he loved the idea of where we were going. So he said, hey, I want to write my next book based on this premise."

Bear with us: we'll be heading back to Super Metroid in just a bit.

"We started to look at the history of Rome," continues Mustard, "and how Rome went from being a Republic to the most lasting empire that's ever existed. And we concluded that the reason Rome transitioned to an empire was that they had collapsed into so many civil wars that the people of the Republic got so tired of the endless in fighting that they allowed an Octavius to really take over and respect the idea of a Republic, but really create the most lasting, huge, fanatical empire we'd ever seen. So what if someone did that to America, what if someone plotted to create an organization that through deception and manipulation could cause America to collapse into a new civil war? And in that civil war, get America so tired of this massive fighting that they would allow a new kind of government to emerge, a government that's truly imperial and truly... America gets accused of being an empire all the time, but we're truly not. We're not Rome. But wouldn't it be cool of someone tried to make America into a Rome? And then if that did happen, what would we do to stop it? That's the over-arcing premise of the Empire franchise. And the story of the book tells the story of the initial collapse into civil war and the stuff that happens after that. Shadow Complex runs parallel to that, it shows the origin story and what's happening with the bad guys, our Cobra, what they're doing to seed all these events and prepare America for this collapse."

Shadow Complex begins in the midst of a raging battle in the streets of Washington. It's not clear *who* you are, but *what* you are is a bad-ass. You can knock guys around like a Terminator, shoot off powerful rockets, cast a stream of incapacitating foam onto a victim and follow up with a grenade explosion. An array of abilities are at your disposal that will eventually be returned to you throughout the Shadow Complex adventure, but for now, this is just a teaser. "But this is not just setting up stuff from gameplay elements, it's setting up the plot as well," explains Mustard. "I hope immediately you can see, this just isn't a typical Live Arcade game."

The downloadable space has become recognizable early on as traditional 2D games, or small-scale shooters, or bite-sized games that owe much to independent works you find on the Net. And I say that as a compliment. But Shadow Complex is certainly removed from that expectation, at least in the way it frames its imagery. The team making Shadow Complex, Chair Entertainment, is owned by Epic Games, which gave you that Gears of War game, and the Unreal Engine tech that powers many of today's biggest hits. Shadow Complex is essentially running off Gears of War II technology; a few seconds into the game conspicuously showcases the heavy pedigree

Must be nice having a direct pipeline

"What if there were a military that employed the best Hollywood designers they could find?"

into Epic and their lauded tech?

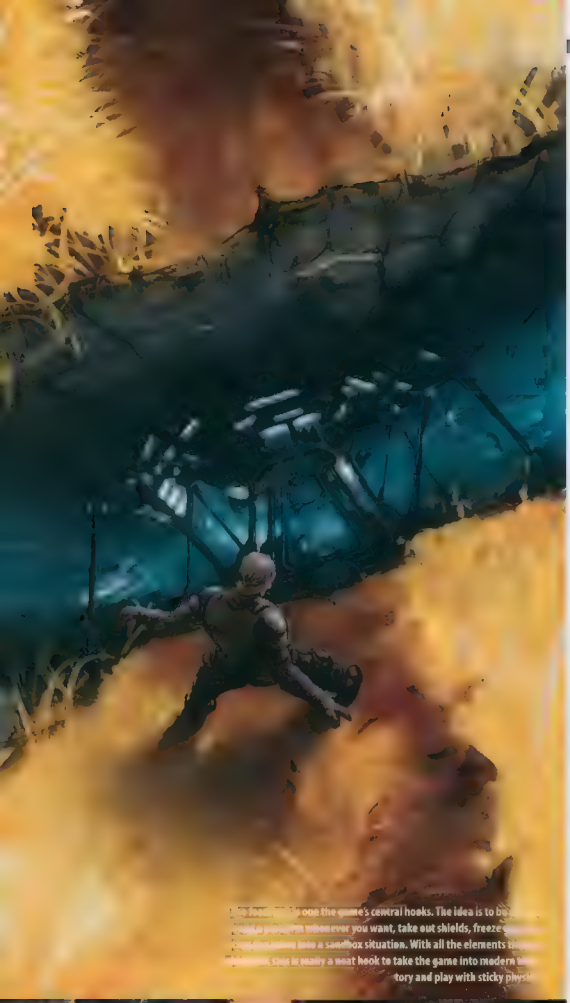
"Yeah," laughs technical director and Donald's brother Geremy Mustard. "It's great. No, it's not bad at all. I mean, they have a good, open system for help and whatnot for the people who are licensing their technology, but still, we hear about all the details of the future direction of the engine, their games, so we know all sorts of stuff that won't be announced for quite a while. They'll find bugs that they fix and we don't have to deal with, and we'll find bugs that are specific to our game deep within their engine, and we'll push it back to them so they'll never have to deal with those bugs either. Every game type deals with different bugs—different performance optimizations, you just run into different issues because you are using the technology differently."

The Chair team decided to take that technology and wrap it around a 2D play structure. When we talk Super Metroid, the comparisons are exact in important foundational ways. Like Super Metroid, you start the game stripped of any extraordinary strengths or weapons or items. You are essentially a blank slate determined to defeat the world and its inhabitants one discovery at a time.

After you leave the explosive prologue, the game switches gears, following Jason Flemming and his girlfriend on a quiet hike somewhere in rural Washington State. She runs off ahead and draws Jason into a cave, where the pair lose sight of each other. "You stumbled across this fringe military organization trying to collapse America into the civil war," Donald points out. "You stumble into this facility on the very day they are preparing this massive attack on Washington. They've blown up the White House, they've killed the President. They've assassinated the Vice President, and they're about to attack New York and San Francisco They assume you're someone important, there's no way you're just hikers."

Jason falls into shallow pit, observing a group of soldiers hauling his girlfriend through a door overhead. At this point you are nothing more than a dude with a flashlight; it's time to start exploring. The first step is locating your backpack, which reveals climbing gear and the first upgrade: the wall jump and ability to grab a ledge. From here, it's important to understand the functionality of the flashlight before going any further.

"My flashlight not only illuminates dark places, it also reveals secrets in the world, different objects I can interact with" explains Donald. "By going to my inventory screen, I notice that the flashlight will reveal certain things: if something is orange I can manipulate it with guns,



things that are green, grenades, purple is foam, red is missiles, things like that. This is one of the changes we thought was important in an updated game. While it was cool when we were ten to go and bomb every single square in the world, I just don't think that's what the modern gamer would appreciate it. So we wanted to find different ways to have that really in-depth exploration but remove at least some of the constraints, where your flashlight would at least give clues and hints that maybe there's something up there worth investigating. And it allows us to get even more diabolical in how we hide things. Sure your flashlight might illuminate it, but now how do I get it? And that's one of the major things about this game I think is important to mention, we have so, so many secrets and so many hidden pickups."

At this point, you have a puny pistol, but the idea, following the Super Metroid template, is to gradually find more equipment. "I go from hiker dude to this guy who is seeing all this crazy stuff going on, and he realizes, I'm just screwed," begins Donald. "But he sees that his only means for survival is to steal their tech and use it against them. It's not too long before I go from hiker guy to the guy who looks more like Snake Eyes. I'm getting into their equipment stores, now I can double jump around because of a thrust pack. I've got an assault rifle. And I've even started to find some prototype tech, like a foam gun that allows me to shoot this quick hardening riot foam that I can use to build geometry anywhere in the world. If I need a platform to get somewhere, I can just build one. So I continue to explore, and now I've got this prototype armor. Now I can do pretty much anything. I have a ton of foam, if I don't have cover, I can build some. If I want a big concussive explosion, I can stick a grenade in the foam and really take stuff out. I've got missiles, and a hook shot, which lets me zip around."

Super Metroid fans can smile in appreciation at this one: "A game like this would not be complete without our own version of the hyper speed run," says Donald, as he sends his character ripping forward in a blur of light and pin-point sound. "And not only can I run super fast, I can run right across the water. I can jump over buildings, I can basically fly through the air. As long as I keep my momentum, I can keep in a hyper speed mode. I can run up walls, across ceilings, run through guys. We've got some big puzzles, big secrets that can only be found with this friction dampener. I really want to point out too, a few of us felt really strongly about this—often times you get the really really awesome stuff right at the very end. In Metroid, by the time you got the screw jump, the game was over. Ok, now go kill Mother Brain. We wanted to change our pacing a bit, so about 2/3 of the way through the game you have access to all the really cool stuff. At that point, you own the world. And there's a good chunk of game left where you feel like this empowered character. Obviously, you're powered up, but there's still stuff to find."

Discussions of Shadow Complex routinely recall the method of a "side-scroller." But as much as you're going from left to right and right to left, you're descending and ascending vast caverns and giant structures. Super Metroid for the G.I. Joe set is a spot on description. Much of the game takes place inside the depths of this shadowy complex, going through mine shafts and inside high-tech factories, cafeterias and buildings in progress, while occasionally popping to the surface and absorbing scenes of pastoral beauty.

"We throw in some tricks while you're outside," Donald points out. "Some big attack choppers come through. You have a big foam turret, you have to weigh this thing down with as much foam as you can, get it to jam up all its gears. The idea of using physics, manipulating your environment to cause different reactions, is something we really like. The foam made the most sense for this game. We talk a lot within the company, something we're passionate about, finding a universal gameplay element that changes the way you look at the game. The foam game is our example of that. Once you realize that everything in the world can be manipulated with foam, what do you do with that?"

The foam gun is a nifty device. In theory, its applications are very cool, very unique; I like how its incorporation into a turret-battle scene changes the complexion of what has become a stale convention in game design. "You think how in Metroid, you could curl up in a ball; that was used all the time," says Donald. "Our foam gun is kind of that big hook that will carry you throughout the game."

Eventually you'll be able to perfect a triple jump, and the rocket pack will bring even more possibilities to the table. It's all about observing the obstacles in the world and overcoming them, one growing puzzle piece at a time. When I think Super Metroid, I think of the intimacy of its world, weaving back and forth through its absorbing, alien challenge. "Yeah, that intimacy is definitely a good way of looking at it," agrees Donald. "We're creating a world where you find a much more intimate understanding. As you travel through it you are gaining not just a familiarity with the world, but a mastering of the world. You know what, I came through this room at one point where I could double jump, and I had grenades and was moving straight through the factory. But maybe you come back to it later, and you're like, wait a minute, I see those angles up the wall. I could get some speed here and run off that wall, jump off it, run up the ceiling, I could smash through the wall over there, and you're in a whole new area you couldn't get to before. A challenge with a game like this is not only to create an intimate setting, but several memorable hubs that start to open up. Through the familiarity of the world comes part of the mastery. It's not all about new new new location; that's a different game. We're expecting you to really embrace the

"I really hope someone plays Shadow Complex and says, I can do that better, and they do. We need more games like this."

Chair Entertainment founders Geremy (left) and Donald (right) Mustard.

world we've given you and open every piece up."

Geremy chimes in with a salient point, another key component of Super Metroid and Shadow Complex's vision: "That's one of the reasons we named it Shadow Complex, because your character is not necessarily the main character, the complex is the main character."

Adds Donald: "There are a lot of people whose first console was an Xbox, or even a 360. The Halo generation. They haven't been exposed to a game that would say, hey, don't just go forward. We have games like Grand Theft Auto that aren't at all linear, but the idea that there are games about exploration and this non-linear onion layer world that peels back as you explore it and gain more abilities within it is sadly somewhat lost right now. We hope to bring it roaring back."

For sake of concise presentation, my view of Shadow Complex is dominated by combat moments, but Donald and Geremy consistently point to their emphasis on exploration, on using the world as narrative and emotional communication. "This is a game about adventure, about taking on the world," emphasizes Donald. But there is indeed the action component, which is one area that Super Metroid begs examination.

"In Metroid you could argue it was a specific choice; they said, 'this game is not about fighting at all.' Sure you have plenty of guys that will shoot at you, but they are really just navigational obstacles in the world that shoot at you. There really isn't any tactical combat element to it. The expectation of the modern gamer, we do expect stuff to shoot at us, and if it is shooting at us, it probably needs to be more than a bouncing thing or whatever. And within the fiction of our world, we wanted to have humans, we wanted them to seem intelligent, we thought it was a good opportunity: could we make combat more tactical in a side scroller? You see a lot of side scrollers that are Contras, you're running down through fire. There is some real strategy in how you position yourself in Shadow Complex: cover does matter, height does matter. Getting a head shot or a better angle does matter. Crouch is pretty important in this game, taking cover and modifying a lot of the stuff that you're doing."

Don't misunderstand though, "it's not a complex cover system like Gears, where you're trying to do all sorts of funky stuff behind cover," adds Geremy. "Cover is very important, but there's no specific system."

Engaging a laser sight for precise targeting, the central trigger mechanic is simple enough: aim your weapon and let loose. While the main character locomotion follows a two-dimensional path, enemies will flank you from different points in an actual 3D space. "We have off-plane combat. That was a big thing we considered, seeing that this was a side scroller, we had a great opportunity to really show off deaths and rag doll in a way you don't really get to see in 3D," explains Donald. "A lot of times you shoot a guy, he's in the distance, you're onto the next thing. With this perspective, it's a great opportunity to see guys flying all over the place, falling into stuff, down shafts, bumping into things, and it's all there framed dramatically and beautifully for you on the screen. So that's something we really pushed in this game."

"Technically when you say something is two-dimensional, it really is, it's hand-drawn sprites on the screen," Geremy jumps in. "Which this game is very much not. It's a 3D game from all aspects of its graphics—we're employing every modern visual trick in the book. Just because the cameras and controls are locked within a two dimensional space within this 3D world, you can get away with calling it a 2D game, and some people do. If you hit an enemy character with a grenade, they fly in a three-dimensional space. It's really a very unique presentation. There's actually an extra complexity here."

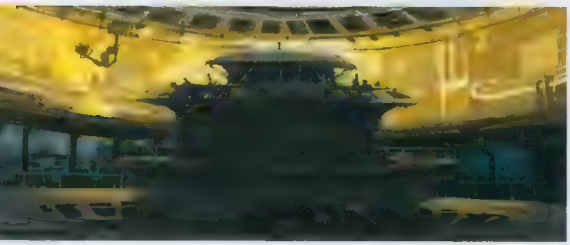
"From a technical standpoint, the thing that excites me about this game is that we have a lot fewer limits from a file size standpoint, so we were allowed a lot more freedom to explore and make extra new things," continues Geremy. "For example one thing I really enjoyed creating for this game, we put a lot of true physics animations on the character. If you shoot your hookshot into the ceiling or something, it pulls you up using actual physical forces to animate the characters arms and legs and stuff. He has very fluid motion when he's going through the air, and when he hooks onto the wall or ceiling, you see him move realistically. It's just a really cool system, when you're swimming it's the same way. There are normal animations, but layered on top is a lot of physics-based stuff. Cool little touches like that we are really happy with. Little extras like that really excite me."

You haven't really talked about boss fights. I'm gonna guess this is a given.

"Absolutely! We wanted some really cool, classic boss fights," says Donald. "So one of those classic components is, what's the gimmick, what's the pattern you have to exploit? And all our bosses have that. But all our bosses can also be defeated by regular gunfire. So I could wall on this guy forever and eventually take him out, but I could also try and find his secret, maybe a weak underside I can throw grenades into. The advantage to exploiting their weakness is that you get a lot more experience for taking them out."

I like that you've built an experience system into Shadow Complex. Now we can start talking about Symphony of the Night.

"Yes! Our experience system really rewards exploration too over combat. So as you explore the world, you're gaining experience," says Donald. "Every square of the map that you expose nets you a bunch of experience. Even if you question, do I want to take the time to go all the way across the map to get that possible power-up, you can be motivated by the journey because you get experience for doing it. And then once you get the power up, you get a ton of experience for that as well. It's by exposing the world and exploring the world that you really start to level up



your guy and gain even more ability, more unlockables."

What are you looking to do with your story? You mentioned that you don't like when gamemakers get criticized for having no business as story tellers.

"If you remember early on, I was beneath my girlfriend when she was being dragged by. We had one quick cut shot, but we didn't really take away your control," explains Donald. "While she's being dragged by you have play control. One thing that's really cool about the side view is that we can show stuff that's kind of story-driven or narrative-based and you are still playing a game. We've infused a lot of that in the way we tell the story. We have cut scenes, these in-game events that are happening, we have dialogue that's happening around you. Guards having meaningful conversations. You'll be crawling through, say, a vent, and the guards are saying some meaningful stuff, because we know you'll be walking through there, we can have dialogue that expands the world, and expands the characters and what's happening. I think Portal, if you read what they were talking about, they said some brilliant stuff. They really tried to tie the story to what you were doing. So many stories in games, the plot is about this, this and this, but it isn't really directly tied at all to what you are doing, the buttons you are pressing. We tried to take a cue from that, and while we have this larger meta story about this organization and this civil war, a lot of the direct story that's happening is about you stealing these guys' technology and then using it. A lot of the narrative is tied into: you stole this foam gun, what effects does that have on the world, how does it affect things around you? Whether people pick up on that, it's an effective device for really tying the player more to what they're doing. You talked about the problems you have with Resident Evil, I'm shooting zombies, but a lot of times the story isn't tied directly to that. It's all this other stuff that's going on. What I'm doing is completely disconnected."

Where are you really looking to go beyond that Super Metroid of 15 years ago?

"That would bring me to my final... if we had to pick three things we really changed or evolved: We tried to evolve the world as the main character," begins Donald "I'm sure again, back in the old days, they were often limited by what they could do. But we have abilities to do things a lot more dynamically. There will be parts of the game where you'll be fighting through a cafeteria, and as you're going through that, you see all these guys and different areas you're going through, it will lead you into these back shafts, where there are all these huge pipes that they use to pump the water between the lakes. And you start to blow those pipes apart, and if you blow them apart, that whole section of the game will flood completely, and it's totally different now. All the guys have drowned, and it's different now, stuff is floating everywhere. The world has changed because of what you did. So we really tried to push this idea of what you do affects the world around you, and permanently change it in some ways; actually, in many ways. The technology allows us to do that, so we have to exploit that. That makes not only a richer experience, but again, emphasizes our story, that this is what you're doing, look at what you're doing to the world around you. You have an impact on this world that you are shaping."

"You have an impact on this world that you are shaping."

There is an argument here: Come up with the world first, the narrative first. Or come up with key game mechanics and a game structure first. I insist on drawing together a narrative, imagining the world design before anything. "Hey, I agree. And yeah, people will argue this, but we are on the side of coming up with the world," says Donald. "We do plot and motivation and the why and the story before we ever talk about what you're doing and how you're doing it. We think you have to have context. What is happening? Then build the mechanics around that. But that's just us, there are obviously other ways of doing this."

Let's talk a bit more about items. The Super Metroid discussion demands it. I'll assume you have some little homages here.

"Yeah, if you want to, say, get the best ending, you have to beat the game in a certain time, under two hours," says Donald. "In our game, with over 120 pickups, tons of secrets, hidden areas, it can also be beaten under two hours with 100 percent if you're good enough. In fact you can even beat it faster."

There's an interesting story: "Ken Lob at Microsoft, he actually worked on Super Metroid, he's one of the guys over there that really loves our vision for this game," says Donald. "And one of the things he said was the best mistake they ever made was that they didn't bulletproof Metroid enough. There were ways you could sequence break. They intended for you to get items in a certain order, but there were ways people found to beat the game with just the freeze gun, or just a certain weapon. So it became a challenge, how low of a percentage can you beat the game? Can you beat the game with only 8 percent?"

"It was called speed runs," adds Geremy

"Yeah, people try all this crazy stuff," continues Donald. "People loved it, finding ways that they thought meant breaking the game world. So we've intentionally built that into our game. There are really secret ways to go about things. Ways you can totally change the structure of play. We can allow you to cheat essentially."

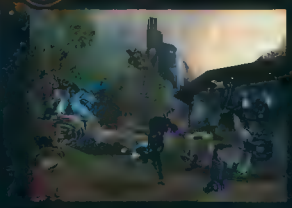
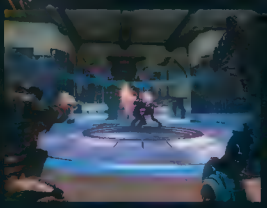
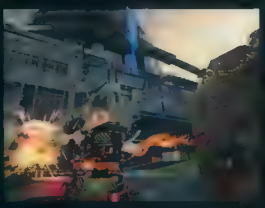
You could think of it as being bad, an abstract ethical choice. People do like to defeat the system.

"And yeah, I'm not gonna go into this now," says Donald, "but we do toy with some of the morality choices. Maybe you don't have to be the good guy."

GLOBAL AGENDA

MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ACTION, PLAYER-DRIVEN WORLD.

JOIN THE GLOBAL AGENDA BETA AT WWW.GLOBALAGENDAGAME.COM

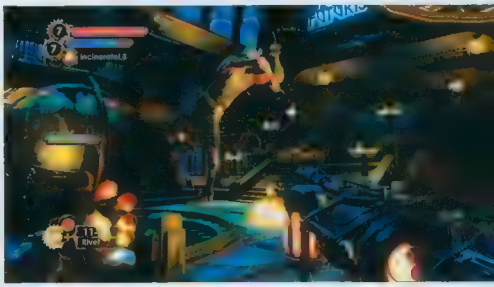




HI-REZ STUDIOS

RP — May contain content inappropriate for children. Visit www.esrb.org for rating information.

POWERED BY UNREAL TECHNOLOGY

FOR PRIORITY REGISTRATION USE CODE: P709



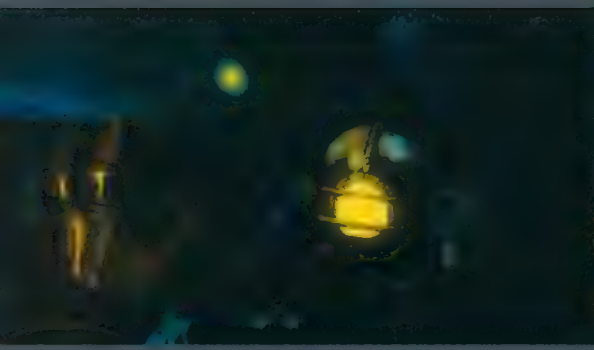
BioShock 2

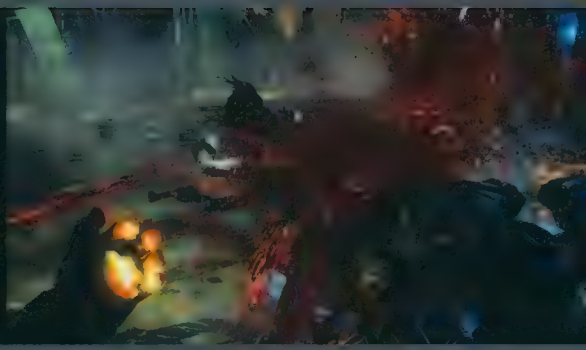
words Matt Cabral

When a successful first-person shooter gets green lit for a sequel, its creators can generally get away with taking the "bigger is better" route the second time around; deliver larger enemies and set pieces, cooler weapons and special effects, and you're halfway home. Bioshock doesn't have that luxury. 2K Boston's Big Daddy-starring title changed the FPS landscape, evolving the genre past big guns and bigger explosions to deliver a shooter that was more about storytelling and atmosphere. In short, crafting an equally engaging sequel presents a task that'd have a Little Sister screaming "Oh no, Mr. Bubbles!" Despite the tall order, 2K Marin—which includes many members from the original BioShock team—appear to be on the right track.

BioShock 2's marketing-steered money-shots and headline-grabbers have been all about playing as a Big Daddy and facing off against the new Big Sister, but at a recent demo, we were able to peel past the hype and find out what else a return to Rapture has in store for us. Once again, unraveling a twisty narrative will be more important than scoring headshots; the story unfolds ten years after the original, and the Big Sister is actually a rescued Little Sister from the first game that wasn't digging life on the surface. The Adam-harvesting tykes' caretaker Tenenbaum also returns, as do the soggy city's spliced-up inhabitants. You'd have a better chance scoring a six pack of Adam at your local 7-Eleven than discovering details on how all these pieces fit together, but seeing the game in action did offer a few hints

In a setting that looked similar to the location of the first game's doomed New Year's Eve party, the Big Sister dotted across a wall, cutting into it with her enormous needle-equipped appendage. A few water-spurting leaks later and the entire room caved in, opening a path into the deep sea and revealing the new protagonist's ability to use his diving suit for what it was originally intended for. The underwater segment was brief, but offered a peek at the potential for suffocating, yet serene exploration outside the confines of Rapture.





This won't hurt a bit.

We hold little doubt that some yet-to-be discovered areas of the failed society will only be accessible by braving the open ocean floor and whatever scary surprises lurk in its murky depths.

Once back inside we were introduced to another new feature that reminded me of the Little Sister escort mission from the final third of the original game. As a Big Daddy, you can now recruit Rapture's pigtailed populace to harvest Adam from corpses; they'll ride on your shoulder until you send them off with their creepy extracting tool. Once they plunge that sucker into the dead flesh, though, watch out because harvesting brings all sorts of spliced freaks out of the woodwork, so you'll need to protect your little one while she steals the juice. Thankfully, you get a few pre-harvest seconds to set traps, and a meter tracks the Little Sister's progress.

Protecting them and defending yourself also takes some new turns in BioShock 2 (Okay, so maybe this sequel is a little bit about "bigger guns," too). For starters, you now control the "buzz" behind Big Daddy's drill, and burrowing that baby into a splicer's stomach looks so damn satisfying. You're also equipped with their standard issue rivet gun—complete with ear-pleasing "thunk!" sound effects—which can be upgraded for optimal baddie plugging. Most impressive, though, is the ability to combine plasmids. We saw Cyclone Trap and Incinerate get mashed together, resulting in a room full of mini-fiery, swirling tornadoes. "Here, Splicer, Splicer, Splicer..." Even standard plasmids get better boosts this time out. In the first game Incinerate just did more damage as it was upgraded, but now it gains new abilities like the option to project it from your palm like a flamethrower.

What we know of BioShock 2 already has us eagerly awaiting our return to Rapture, but it's what we're yet to discover that has us more excited. The first title was full of game-changing surprises that encompassed both the gameplay and storytelling, and based on what's been teased so far it seems the sequel will find new ways to sting our senses. Until we uncover more, enjoy these screens...would you kindly?

"Based on what's been teased so far it seems the sequel will find new ways to sting our senses."

Battlefield 1943

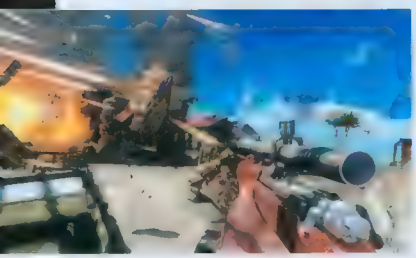
Frostbite in a paradise of war

words Mike Griffin

Back-to-back months with a new Battlefield game has been a treat, but I won't deny craving a DICE multiplayer epic of the scale of BF 2 or 2142. Like Battlefield Heroes, previewed in these pages last month, the upcoming Battlefield 1943 is a smaller scale project designed for deployment via digital download. Unlike Heroes, a lower spec PC-only shooter, BF 1943 harnesses the cutting-edge technology of DICE's awesome Frostbite engine to fully exploit the 360, PS3 and modern PC configurations. The game will hit Xbox Live and PSN first in July, followed by a special PC version in September—arriving at under $15 across the board. My hands-on play with BF 1943 reveals that it may be the perfect, affordable mid-summer snack for WWII FPS fans.

As I alluded to above, I can't help but imagine Battlefield 2's modern combat or BF 2142's insane 64-player Titan airship battles revisited in a major release, and more importantly, powered by the beautiful Frostbite engine on display here. Battlefield 1943 will enter active duty with just four maps, but each is a stunning Pacific theatre of war laced with dynamic and destructible objects. I hopped into planes, boats, jeeps and tanks while competing with DICE and EA staff across the Guadalcanal, Wake Island, Iwo Jima and Coral Sea maps, soaking in the beautiful textures and lighting while testing Frostbite's destructible mettle. While it isn't quite up to the complexity of something like Crysis Wars, BF 1943 has some of best online shooter destruction I've seen in a while. You can barrel into fences, wipe out bridges, smash a Sherman through buildings and sandbag bunkers, level a palm tree forest, or bomb entire village districts into smoking husks and physics debris. It's satisfying stuff.

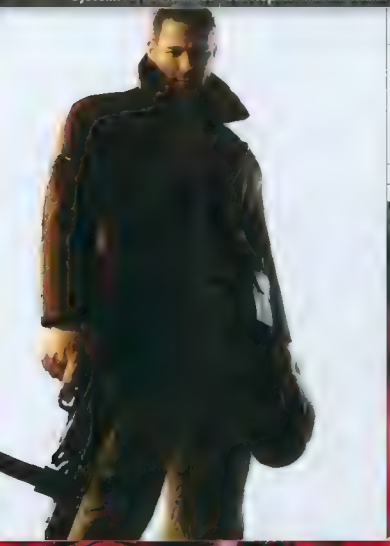
> "Battlefield 1943 may be the perfect, affordable mid-summer snack for WWII FPS fans."



BF 1943's attractive and reactive playground plays host to 24-player, 12-on-12 multiplayer rounds, guided by familiar control point objectives in all but one of its maps. This fourth map, the recently revealed Coral Sea, introduces the Air Superiority mode: essentially pure plane-to-plane aerial combat, a dogfighter's dream. The topography of the maps and DICE's typically outstanding level design provide each class with many opportunities. A Rifleman's long-range anti-infantry specialization rocks on Iwo Jima, using a high-powered semi-auto rifle and RPG attachment to mow down bunched enemies at choke points. The Scout felt at home on the hilly island of Guadalcanal, planting TNT explosives on his way to higher vistas for some merciless sniping. The Infantry class is your Master of Tanks: he packs a short range MG with a kick, an anti-tank bazooka, and a trusty wrench for on-the-spot vehicle repairs (or thumps to the head). Build a nice, rounded squad with some buddies and roll those CPs as US Marines or the Imperial Japanese Navy.

"I shall return... once I respawn"

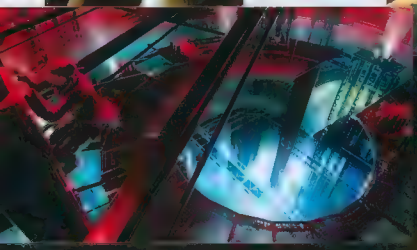
Battlefield 1943 combat experience bestows promotions to soldier rank (visible to others on the scoreboard), with achievements to unlock through a Stats & Awards system. Think class-specific challenges and bragging rights here, not gameplay-altering persistent changes. It rounds-out a fine little fifteen dollar download package that, while perhaps not the huge sequel we crave, should easily quench your thirst for WWII shooter thrills this summer. And the "Download Content" option in the main menu of our Xbox 360 preview version hints at a future of DLC for this well-crafted Battlefield.



The Saboteur

Will Pandemic's stylized WWII shooter satisfy where Mercenaries 2 didn't?

words Douglass C. Perry



More than 10 years ago, Dreamworks' first successful videogame project was Medal of Honor (MOH). Rendering themes refreshed in the public's imagination from the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, MOH invented the WWII sub-genre that hasn't stopped pumping blood into the heart of the videogame industry to this day.

Despite a few publishers' annual desire to exploit the sub-genre (yes, you Activision), World War II remains fertile ground for videogames, and it's why Pandemic's The Saboteur is so appealing. Harvesting technology and experience from its other properties, Mercenaries 2 and Destroy All Humans, Pandemic plans to infuse the WWII European Theater with a free range play-style, worthwhile characters, and a vengeance-driven story in The Saboteur.

The pre-World War II setting stars Sean Devlin, an Irish mechanic-turned race car driver who, in two days' time, loses his best friend and his career, and discovers Germany's plans to invade Europe. Shortly thereafter, embittered and set adrift in Paris, Devlin is persuaded to join the French Resistance and English Special Intelligence and sets out to wreak havoc in Nazi-occupied Paris, France. Thus begins The Saboteur.

The Saboteur gives you all the things you've come to expect from a sandbox game—running, gunning, vehicle-jacking, the ability to explore big-open territories—and adds new elements. Equipped with skills acquired as a youth in Ireland, Devlin is a brawler, a climber, and has a penchant for blowing shit up.

All of the mechanics are simple. Devlin can brawl with Nazi officers using a few simple two- and three-button combos, sneak up on them and perform stealth attacks, and steal their clothes. While suited in Nazi clothing, Devlin can then access otherwise difficult-to-enter Nazi-occupied territory—camps, buildings, swanky parties, and personnel offices. As long as he's not in direct sight of a Nazi soldier, he can climb the scaffoldings of buildings and explore an impressive amount of rooftop real estate. Devlin also can slide across telephone wires to enter into German territory, distinguished by a stylized black-and-white color palette to identify Nazi-occupied areas from the rest of Paris. Once inside, his infinite supply of grenades and dynamite assures he will hurt as many Nazis as often as possible.

"It's hard not to associate Devlin as a kind of Irish Indiana Jones."

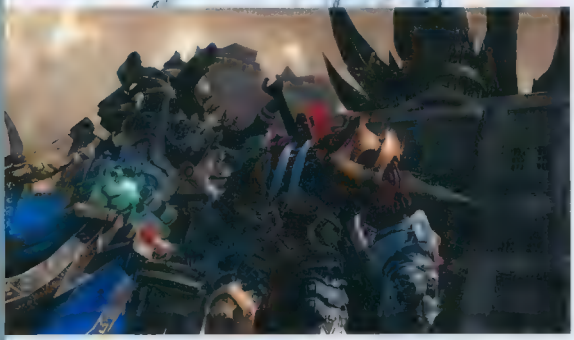
The Saboteur's writers do a surprisingly good job creating an interesting cast. As you expand past your primary mission-giver and meet new ones, you'll encounter engaging mercenary-style businessmen, unexpected underground leaders, and perhaps even have a few love affairs amidst it all. Devlin himself delivers an assortment of colorful lines, and it's hard not to associate him as a kind of Irish Indiana Jones.

It's The Saboteur's constant mixture of stealth missions comprising clambering, disguises, and variety of discreet solutions that makes it so distinct—and fun. The Saboteur could be this year's stealthy surprise if Pandemic keeps its focus on the elements that differentiate it from the GTA pack.

VISION QUEST

The never-ending struggle between creative and corporate machines

V



"ABOUT THE ONLY WAY TO GET A GOOD GAME MADE PRESENTLY IS TO RAISE THE MONEY, OPEN A STUDIO, CREATE A DEMO AND THEN PRAY SOMEONE PICKS IT UP BEFORE THE MONEY RUNS OUT."

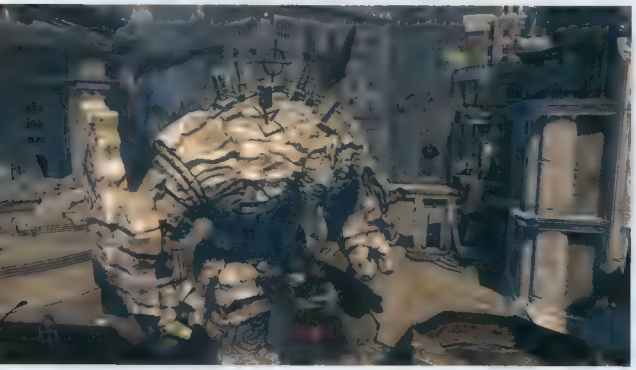
"THE CO-CREATOR OF SONIC JUST MADE A GAME YOU 'PLAY' WITH A FREAKING SHOE BOX. ENOUGH WITH THE IMAGINARY MARKET SHIFTS ALREADY."

Japanese started making them in the 90s. They've just gotten better and gaming has gotten bigger. News flash; we *all* play them. But that doesn't mean that Rare will sell more Banjo Kazooie if they make it "casual." Nuts & Bolts is pure genius, but Rare fans want Rare action. Whoever decided to put the kibosh on the next-gen version of the original made a very bad decision, and I say that as the father of an eight-year-old gamer who's logged over 100 hours on the game. Kameo sold over a million copies. Hmmm, doesn't take a genius. Same goes for Guitar Hero and Rock Band. Don't bother aping them or shoehorning musical elements into every game. See, we have those games now. None of this other nonsense is working. Poor Yuji Naka. The co-creator of Sonic just made a game you "play" with a freaking shoe box. Enough with the imaginary market shifts already. When can we get back to letting great designers make great games? Because unless you're Hideo Kojima, or Shigeru Miyamoto (who also got caught up in the madness; Wii Music? Please…) about the only way to get a good game made presently is to raise the money, open a studio, create a demo and then pray someone picks it up before the money runs out. But even then, unless you can hold on to the IP, why bother?

When Microsoft agreed to fund Voodoo Vince and sign Beep Industries as a first-party studio, provided they control the IP (Vince) what were they supposed to do? Say no? They did what any other studio would do and celebrated. At any other point in gaming history, that deal would have rendered a slew of triple-A games; Vince would be on 360—which would be glorious—Microsoft would be stronger, and Beep, a fantastic studio, would be thriving. Who would have thought in a million years that months later, they'd declare war on the kinds of games they were in the middle of putting back on the map? Voodoo Vince (on zero marketing) has sold considerably more copies then BKNB. For the record, I'm a big fan of Microsoft Game Studios on the whole. I question the individual who made the decision to obliterate four amazing studios back in '06.

Take a look at Darksiders—one of the most elegant, detailed, altogether gorgeous games in the world. In fact, in my opinion, it's that by a wide margin, especially given its humble roots. We see set-up screens like these all the time. Games don't really look like this, usually. But this one does—this IS the game. What's even crazier than how it looks is that it actually plays exactly as Joe Mad envisioned, in the vein of Zelda: Ocarina of Time.

I sat down and played it at THQ for an hour and they nearly had to call security. If it wasn't for those UFC guys, I'd still be there. But what's



Darksiders: a vision realized
This epic battle continues throughout an entire chapter and then culminates with this unforgettable Zelda-esque encounter. One of many such bigger than life events in Vigil's FIRST game.

War! What is it good for? (...besides extinguishing angelic hordes). Can't we all just get along?

REALLY, REALLY crazy is that Darksiders is Vigil's FIRST GAME and it didn't cost a fortune. See what happens when visionary designers are left to their own devices? Makes you wonder why it took nearly a decade for Joe to finally realize his vision. Joe Madureira a.k.a., Joe Mad, is a big deal in the comic book world; as big as they get. If anyone could transition into video game development and get their vision into gamers' hands, you'd think it would be Joe, but it was a long road to Darksiders. One of the first features we ran in Play back in 2000 was on the development studio that Joe started, along with Tim Donley and Greg Peterson, Tri Lunar, and their first game, Dragonkind. Don't bother Googling it though, because it never got past the conceptual stage before the money ran out. From there Joe hooked up with Realm Interactive and started working on Trade Wars: Dark Millennium, which became Exarch after they were acquired by NC Soft and then ultimately released as Dungeon Runners. It's taken Joe Mad nearly a decade to see his vision realized in a video game, and he had to open his own studio to do it. But here's the kicker: Vigil has only been in existence since July 2007 and Darksiders will very likely ship later this year, early next at the latest. Imagine this team with three years and a major budget... No, don't; your head might explode. Although I'm sure some crack online game jockey would give it a four just to see if they can screw up the average score on the websites (that do ZERO due diligence to qualify their sources) the industry execs now entrust with their decision making. That's a good call. Those expensive college educations really pay off.

It's ironic that in this same issue I review Damnation—our cover story the month before Darksiders (July and Aug. 2008) Damnation's creators had a vision too, and a very cool one at that, but theirs didn't make it into gamers' hands. Somewhere along the line, they had to compromise their vision, and Damnation became a more traditional scripted game. Had it begun development as a by-the-numbers adventure, it might have been a great one, but changing direction midway and turning a vision similar to inFamous or Bionic Commando into a scripted adventure just doesn't pan out. Whether the problem lies with Blue Omega or elsewhere, the point is that the vision never made into gamers' hands, and that's not good for anybody. More often than not, when you shoot for the stars your first time out, the results are fair at best. But sometimes it's better to fail spectacularly than succeed at following a recipe.

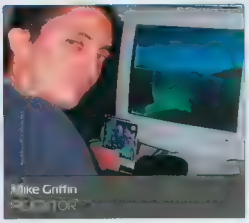
Just ask Donald and Geremy Mustard, whose new studio, Chair, was recently acquired by Epic Games on the strength of their second game, Shadow Complex, this month's cover story (dang, we're good). Their first game, Advent Rising, like Damnation, was incredibly ambitious, so much so, that like Blue Omega, they had to compromise their vision. Unlike Damnation, for all of its flaws Advent Rising was still a powerful game (I'd rather have one Advent Rising than 100 Wanteds) but either way the experience lead Donald and Geremy to the next-gen 2D space that I've been saying would catch fire for years now (sucks always being right). If the people in power would just listen, we could avoid so much waste and missed opportunity in this industry, but they seem more distant and closed off than ever, and the people they're hiding behind, for the most part, simply don't have a clue. They're busy closing off all the old channels we used to use to sell great video games, choking and stifling the creative process in every conceivable way. But there's so much noise nobody can hear the doodie when it hits the fan anymore. Game execs should take one day a month where they turn off the twitter, shut down the PC, turn off the cell phone, pick up a land line and connect with real people. Visionary people, and maybe even people that have been on the front lines playing the games and talking to the developers, PR people and consumers for 18 years. Seems logical; which is exactly why it will never happen, because their routines have become just like their games: one big Quick Time Event.

JINX
JINX.COM
JINX
Get
Into
It.
JACE HALL
Founder of MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS,
Host of the JACE HALL SHOW &
Executive Producer of upcoming ABC series 'V'

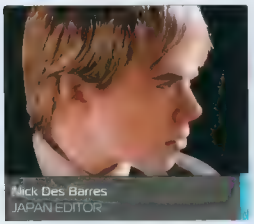
Modus Op: Play games in the genres I know and love to their conclusion and then rate them on how well, or not, they deliver relative to the system, genre, and target audience. That used to be the ONLY acceptable way to review back when you had to actually be an authority on gameplay to earn the privilege. Now all you need is access, and most PR will deal out their games to anyone with a press credential, which is about as hard to get as a used copy of Bubsy 3D. **Brain Drain:** I need to understand how any critic with even the most basic knowledge of what makes a good action/adventure, and what it takes to make one the size and scope of Bionic Commando, can responsibly give it less than an 8. Any readers out there who have the game, I'd love to hear from you. I'd also like to know why these sites that don't qualify a single player are taken so seriously. When did all this become a big joke? And how much longer are these dopey co's going to take it? **Game of the Month:** inFAMOUS

Modus Operandi: There is no checklist for reviewing a game. The best game feels right from the start, and the best game is not concerned with feature sets as much as how each component is handled. If the visual space is not compelling in some way, the gameplay better be so good that it's Tetris (which offers an incredibly interesting visual space)
Brain Drain: E3 checklist: 1) Pain meds 2) Green+ bars 3) Stack of CDs to brighten the ride through LA traffic 4) Prepared apologies for showing up to meetings late since the last meeting let out late 5) Verbal ammunition for after-hours discussions 6) Remember to think happy thoughts 7) Don't admit you're most excited to see what Sony has for the PS3
Game of the Month: inFAMOUS

Modus Operandi: Here's the way of it: a game can be fun, but not good, and good, but not fun. The two really are mutually exclusive; if it wasn't the case, Mutant League Football would score a 12 out of 10 and Silent Hill 2 would score a 4 out of 14. Thank God Play eliminated its scores. Also, Greg is counting the days until the installation of Reviewatron 4125, which will finally be able to suggest that fans of the genre should, in fact, like a particular game while all others should try before they buy—in 10 different languages!
Brain Drain: It is daunting to note that not only do I have a Facebook account, but moreso that one of my "friends" there is a character in a mediocre PC-based game.
Game of the Month: Resident Evil, The Versus Years...



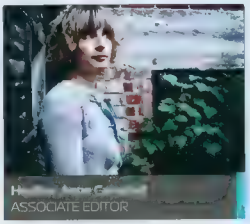
Modus Operandi: I'm looking for convincing themes I can feel and considered polish I can respect, regardless of a game's scope or platform. I absolutely believe that games can be considered art, and a lot of great art requires a technical understanding of the canvas, instruments and stage. That's a balance I care about in a medium whose MO is interactivity. Interface is also very important to me..
Brain Dran: I suppose all games are community-funded, since there are always development costs to re-coup via sales, but we're starting to see an increase in independent projects that rely on direct financial support from the player community early in development. It's a powerful way to ensure your interest is rewarded.
Game of the Month: Killing Floor



Modus Operandi: Hideo Kojima may not agree with me, but I believe video games can be art. Although I have been writing about them for 14 years, never have I felt comfortable assigning numerical scores; there exist no universal, pan-human criteria against one can judge works of art. The most a critic can aspire to is describing, with as much eloquence as he can muster, how the work in question makes him feel. That is my goal when I review a game. **Brain Drain:** Announcements of announcements of announcements: When will the madness end? By the time you read this, Hideo Kojima will have perpetrated a three-week, five-stage countdown process on the web for his E3 game(s). Look, I don't want to spend days scrutinizing obtuse teaser sites, okay? Show me your game when it's ready. Promotion like this almost makes me appreciate Nintendo's one-month-from-announcement-to-store-shelves strategy.
Game of the Month: inFAMOUS

Modus Operandi: I couldn't be happier that we've done away with review scores. It's ridiculous to believe that there's some objective standard of quality that covers the opinions of every person who plays games. That said, I will miss dishing out the 3.5s, because a good reaming just isn't the same without some arbitrarily low score at the end.
Brain Drain: The website countdowns to new game reveals were cute for a while there, but now I'm officially sick of being jerked around. In recent months they haven't even counted down to full blown reveals, just maddening hints and concept art and vague interviews with all the information redacted. Just send out a press release like gentlemen, damn it.
Game of the Month: inFAMOUS

Modus Operandi: I come from the angle that games can always be fixed and/or improved in some way, that games should be about making the player happy, not the developer, and if a game is multiplayer, it should be online, period. I'll forgive a game's flaws if it is an enjoyable experience, but I wish the small user-centered details weren't so often overlooked.
Brain Drain: *Devil Survivor: a fanfiction, by Eric.* "The city has gone dark. My COMP opens, the demons come. The dark ones try to bind me, but I struggle, I fight, I win. I must, or in two more days, I die. The soft sounds of muffled sobbing come from my left. I glance at my teammate; poor Yuzu, she's been through so much. I... Lord those are large."
Game of the Month: PiCTOBiTS

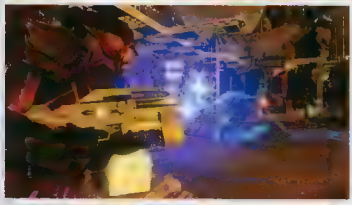


Modus Operandi: Games are a journey, and should be covered like travel journalism. It's more important to know how a game affects you than to provide a list of options it features on its menu screen. The number of guns, the types of vehicles, the variety of locations—these are bullet points for the back of the box. I'll tell you if it made me feel.
Brain Drain: Terminator: Salvation was terrible. MoG and the production staff should have sat down in a theater with any average action film fan and discussed what makes Terminator 2 awesome long before they ever storyboarded a single shot. Cameron is not a genius; he just makes the right choices. God, Terminator: Salvation sucked.
Game of the Month: Street Fighter IV – Championship Edition

Red Faction: Guerrilla

And the walls came tumbling down

words Matt Cabral



Within a console generation, gaming generally gets better in tiny incremental steps; killing an undead menace in a zombie game today is just a bit cooler than it was a year ago because technology continues to discover small new ways to make flesh-hungry shufflers collapse into bloody heaps. Similarly, explosions will no doubt look slightly better in the upcoming Modern Warfare 2 than they did in the last Call of Duty entry. We expect this from our games. What we don't expect, and rarely get, are huge leaps in technology that send our jaws racing to the floor. For me, Red Faction: Guerrilla delivers exactly this with its destructible environments—excuse me while I collect my jaw.

Not since the original Mercenaries have I so enjoyed not only blowing stuff up, but sticking around to take in the explosive effects. From single-room buildings to multi-story towers, every structure in Red Faction falls differently and with incredibly satisfying realism. Every time you level a building you'll be treated to some varying combination of fractured concrete, twisted metal, shattered glass, smoke, fire and debris. The folks at Volition have taken everything into account—physics, gravity, architecture, weight, mass—in ensuring this aspect of their game stands out like a mushroom cloud in the desert.

Watching a seemingly unbreakable structure crack, crumble and ultimately fall into a smoldering pile is only half the fun, though, as using the game's staggering variety of weapons—real-world and Mars-made—to turn yourself into a human wrecking ball is also all kinds of awesome. But, it's not just the expected thrill of blowing a Volkswagen-size hole in a wall with a rocket launcher that makes the destructive play so damn satisfying; sure, taking out a baddie-populated building with a single blast will jolt your adrenaline, but going to town on a wall of concrete with a sledgehammer, and letting your senses swim in the ensuing creaking and buckling, is equally amazing. Whether I was busting up a building brick by brick or outfitting a vehicle with remote charges and driving it into its support pillars for a quicker result, I was continually engaged by the destruction-driven gameplay.

Thankfully, turning everything in your path into dust and rubble plays right into Red Faction's main objective. As a member of the titular revolutionary group, you're tasked with taking on the corrupt Earth Defense Force. And liberating Mars by pissing on their property is the fastest route to victory. The more of their stuff you destroy, the weaker they become. Additionally, the red planet's oppressed populace—tracked by a morale meter—will come to your aid as your ability to kick ass becomes apparent to them. If all that wasn't incentive enough to blow up the bad guys, you're also awarded in-game currency for your destructive deeds, allowing you to upgrade and purchase weapons and gear

The game unfolds in an open world, comprised of six areas, through a series of critical and side missions. And while this structure sometimes struggles to support a story that starts strong but quickly moves into afterthought territory, Red Faction's focus on destruction is handled so well it easily outshines any shortcomings. Quite simply, it'll be a long time before you have this much fun blowing shit up, again.

parting shot

Red Faction's destruction tech is leaps and bounds beyond anything you've ever seen or played. But the fact this aspect encompasses nearly the entirety of the gameplay is really what makes it stand out; destroying stuff isn't just a means of extracting some cool eye and ear candy within the game—it *is* the game.

Little King's Story

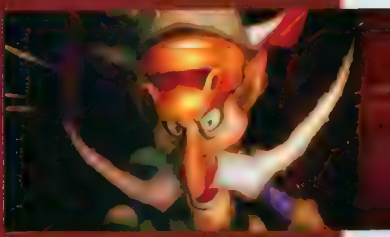
It's good to be the Little King

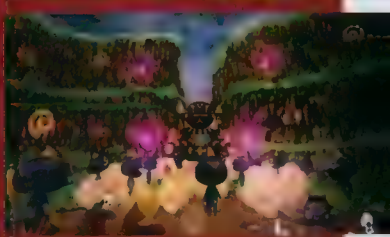
words Dave Halverson

When I was a kid (well, a smaller kid at least) every Christmas the family would gather around the TV to watch Rankin/Bass' *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. Back then stop-motion animation was a spectacle akin to CGI circa *Toy Story* before they started using it in toilet cleaner ads. Fast forward a few decades and I have a brood of my own; but as the times have changed, so have kids. My eight-year-old wakes up early to play his 360 (and complain that he doesn't have a PS3) for 45 minutes before school and the last movie he saw was *Monsters vs. Aliens* in 3D which blew me away more than it did him… And our six-year-old twins aren't far behind. When I finally convinced them to watch *Toy Story*, they were wholly underwhelmed, but the first time they saw *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* circa 1964 they made me buy the DVD…in the middle of summer. CGI is still special in the right hands, but there's a timeless quality to stop-motion, similar to side scrollers like Super Metroid or Gunstar Heroes.

The first thing that came to mind as I embarked on Little King's Story was how much the design reminded me of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer; not so much for the characters—LKS is far more twisted—but in the overall presentation. It's not the technology per se that makes the game so special, but the way Cing bends it to their will, molding their tiny adventure with the utmost attention to detail as it pertains to their world, instead of making it bend to fit into a particular category or demographic. Over the past few years, the kinds of Japanese games that dominated the industry since Nintendo resurrected it have been waning in the wake of stiff American and European competition, and gaming has lost much of its innocence in the process. Even where pure fiction is concerned, simple concepts often become overly convoluted walkthroughs, designed and scrutinized to suit "everyone" and thus serve no one… at least anyone looking for any substance. The new status quo wants everything spelled out and absolute, but where's the fun in that? Little King's Story bucks that trend from the moment the curtain rises. Cing spend all of 30 seconds, if that, explaining how their tiny protagonist comes to rule the Alpoko kingdom, and even less on why it is how it is when it is…because it doesn't matter. All that matters is that he's the king of a peculiar little kingdom that his Minister, Howser, hopes he'll make into a very large kingdom—in fact, he seems quite sure of it.

Your new kingdom stands at three Ministers counting Howser (along with Records Minister Verde and Anything Minister Liam), three Cows, and a few lazy citizens. The job rate is 0% and the treasury is empty. Not so hot, but nothing a little hard work can't fix, and so off you go to dig up enough treasure to put the new kingdom plan into motion. You begin by recruiting a few citizens to dig up some treasure. Point your scepter at a crack in the earth and away they dig. Once you've amassed enough loot (you'd be surprised what's buried around your castle) to erect a farmhouse—Howser sees to all construction while you slumber—send a citizen through the door and viola, they emerge a hardworking farmer. That's how it begins… Each passing job class enables further progression into the surrounding areas: Grunt Soldiers hack away at any evil vegetation, Animal Hunters arrows can reach higher elevations, Buff Lumberjacks cut through barriers and provide brute force, Regular Carpenters build bridges, and so on… You begin with a tiny little band and, eventually lead 30 or more various military and civilian troops into battle or what have you. The more you reap, the more you sow; with each passing conquest comes more houses and more jobs, and of course more citizens





to govern, and they let you know it. One of your first official acts is the construction of a suggestion box so your citizens can speak their mind, ask for favors, and let you know how you're doing, anonymously of course. When you're not on official business—and there's a ton to do—requests from the suggestion box make up the game's side quests, each with its own difficulty rating, time limit and consequences. Every citizen has a name and personality and will address you when spoken to according to their demeanor and the condition of the kingdom. Fail a mission and someone could die; their lives are in your hands after all. Don't miss the funeral. They can be resurrected, but a death is a death. As king everything you do, good or bad, right or wrong, in victory or defeat, affects your constituents. They celebrate with you when you're victorious and call you names when you're not, just like cable news!

Before long you'll have dug enough holes, cut through enough barriers and put the kibosh on enough marauding onions to amass a Farmhouse, Guard House and Carpenter Hut, after which Little King's Story's true colors

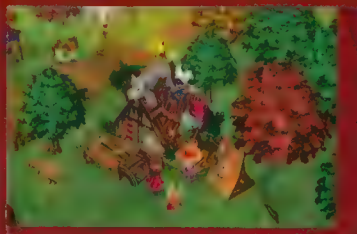
"..a squat boy king, married? Living in sin?? Hell yeah, Japanese games are back!"

begin to emerge…and they're not pink and powder blue. In order to expand your kingdom you'll face off against the Fierce Cow Bones, and then cross the river into UMA territory to exterminate the Onii King, and thusly, according to Howser, take over the entire world (It doesn't take long to realize that Howser is a power hungry war monger and a bit of a loon to boot). Anyway, the Onii King has called you "King Aljerko" and stated that "you suck, jerk," so he has to go. Your second boss battle taking on the bulbous king is a sign of what lies ahead. The Onii King's minions are embedded on either side of the arena firing from ledges and feeding ammo to the king. There's plenty of cover to make quick work of the lot using your Hunters to take out his minions, exposing the king to your Grunts who leap onto anything you command them to and commence wailing, to the death if necessary.

Once the Onii King falls something altogether bizarre happens. That demon Muppet had a prisoner? A princess no less; and so our little king gets himself a queen along with a bigger castle (the first of many) complete with a little love shack where they can discuss current events—the princess has an agenda or two—or just do some smooching. A squat boy king, married? Living in sin?? Hell yeah, Japanese games are back! But that's not the half of it. During the festival celebrating your world domination you discover that the world is a lot bigger than Howser imagined. There are at least six regions and six kings beyond the castle walls and Howser would have you attack them all one by one…but will you? Should you? King Duvroc, a full on drunk, has invited you to come dance all night, and King Shishkebaboos wants you to bring lots of BonBons tres bons to his tea party. Maybe these guys aren't so bad after all. But your citizens are calling; they're not so happy about your mandatory exercise law, and there's unrest in the forest, not to mention a big red dragon milling about. But shouldn't you finally earn enough money to erect that Shopping Arcade so that you can recruit some Savvy Merchants? If battle is eminent there are weapons to build, and treasures to assign. And what about that strange beach where they say the dead often wash up encased in pots? Maybe your astronomer is right and the sky really is falling. What will your Little King do? Mine's going to kick an ass or two; that's what would Brian Boitano'd do!

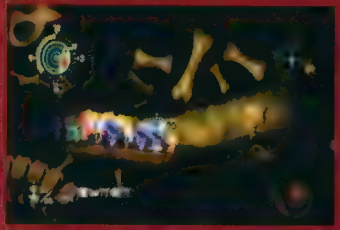
parting shot

I can't sing Cing's praises loud enough. Little King's Story is the freshest Wii game since de Blob and a return to the kind of Japanese development that made me fall in love with games in the first place.

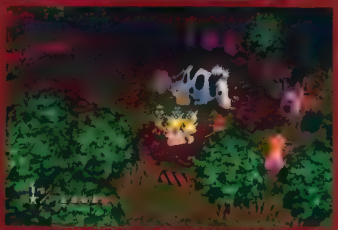


Boss Room & Board: Each job class has its own [illegible] but when the [illegible] it's getting real ugly.

Grunt Soldiers and Buff Lumberjacks are like little kamikazes. A good King knows when to summon them back and find a healing spring.



Mind your manners. Where there's a will your Little King will find a way.. or at least buy one. Little King's Story's middle name is discovery.



Don't have a cow man! At least not this one. The Fierce Cow Bones have got to go. Nothing a few grunts and a hard working farmer can't handle.

System: X360, PS3, PC, Wii, PS2, NDS | Developer: [redacted] | Publisher: Atari | ESRB: Teen | Available: June 16

Ghostbusters

words Steve Hogarty

I ain't 'fraid of no Ray Parker, Jr. royalties

Terminal Reality's Ghostbusters is no stranger to death. After witnessing the untimely demise of Sierra, initially handling publishing duties before becoming a swallowed-whole casualty of the Activision-Blizzard merger, the game seemed to be left with one foot in the grave when Activision inexplicably passed on publishing it.

That was a mistake on Activision's part—just ask the legions of angry Ghostbusters fans that would've rioted if deprived a chance to strap on proton packs and 'bust the hell out of some Manhattan ghoulies. Terminal Reality clearly knew what they were getting into when they signed up for this project; after so many cheap cash-ins of such a beloved series, they had to do things right. Luckily, Atari saw the game's potential.

See, for a lot of us, Ghostbusters isn't just a game. It's a realization of a childhood dream, and one that we played out countless times with plastic ghost traps, PKE readers and other Spengler-created equipment when we were kids. The dev team seems to be have been well aware of this fact (my guess is mostly from personal experience) and kept it in mind throughout the game's development cycle.

In any case, that they have given us a quality Ghostbusters game, let alone a new Aykroyd/Ramis penned 'sequel' to Ghostbusters II complete with nearly all of the principal cast, is a minor miracle. Hundreds of hours of tweaking, testing and sheer love for the series have obviously gone into making this one, and the result is the best damn Ghostbusters game ever seen. Even without a celluloid counterpart, this is a new benchmark for movie games.

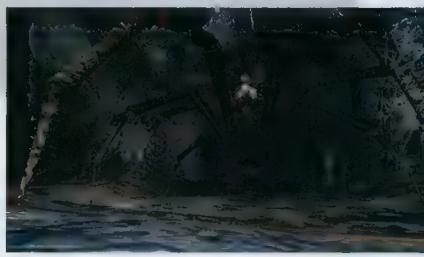
Yes, there is no Ghostbusters III film—not yet, anyway—but thanks to a considerable amount of non-phoned-in cast performances, generally spot-on likenesses and a great script that fits nicely into the existing 'busters canon, this really feels like it. So much so, in fact, that those Office scribes writing the upcoming film sequel might actually want to consider dropping that "III" from its title. The only difference is here you're actually playing it, albeit as a new member.

As excited as I was when I first heard about Ghostbusters, I had my doubts about the rookie. Why the hell would anyone want to play some new kid over the original four? Not to worry: the new cadet remains nameless (Venkman says they shouldn't get too attached for liability purposes) aside from the team's amusingly never-ending supply of nicknames for him, and doesn't utter a word from start to finish.

This is a genius move on Terminal Reality's part. Other than acting as a vessel to see the interactions between Venkman, Spengler, Ray, and Winston, the rookie's anonymity also subconsciously allows you to be a part of the team, so at any given moment you'll be worrying a lot more about catching pesky incorporeals than your identity. Not that you'll have much time to stand around having an existentialist crisis anyway; clock in with this one and you're on the job busting ghosts with few lulls (unless they're playing tricks, like shorting out lights or moving objects to block your path, which happens a fair bit). Basically catching ghosts is like a spectral tug of war: wear down a spirit's resistance by blasting it with your proton pack, then go rodeo on 'em by wrangling and slamming them against the ground. Position them over your trap and they'll scream ghost gibberish and claw at the edges of the cone, which makes catching a particularly obstinate ghoul feel really satisfying.

To break up what could have been a monotonous experience with weakening and trapping spooks, Terminal Reality included some proton pack modifications that make the game feel more like a shooter, from a "standard" shot-gun blast to slowing enemies down with a stasis stream (Dead Space, anyone?). Though it can make the game a tad action-heavy at times, the mods are fun and show the same painstaking attention to detail you see everywhere else in the game.

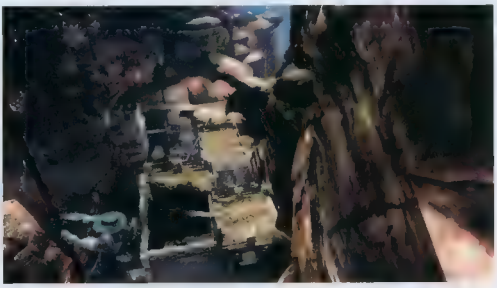
Every cursed artifact you scan with your PKE meter, for example, has its own darkly amusing profile, and the game keeps a tally of how much property damage you cause, just for fun. The script itself is more entertaining than funny, but everyone has at least a few humorous moments and one-liners, and the heart is definitely in the performances. The only disappointment, surprisingly, comes from Bill Murray, or rather a lack of him. Murray agreed to do the game if everyone had equal screen-time, but tragically, Venkman just doesn't seem to be in the story enough. And if you're expecting the game to actually be scary (which you shouldn't) think again. Though, come to think of it, Stay-Puft's charred, melting face after getting smacked in the kisser with a blast from your proton pack is a pretty disturbing sight.



"For a lot of us, Ghostbusters isn't just a game. It's a realization of a childhood dream."

parting shot

The gang's all here—well, except for Louis. Terminal Reality might have created the only true Ghostbusters game, ever, but it's about as good as we could have asked for (could have used more Murray, though). Who you gonna call? Atari for some DLC.



DAMNATION

Paradise lost

words Dave Halverson

"Their vision was sound, but somewhere down the line the execution failed them..."

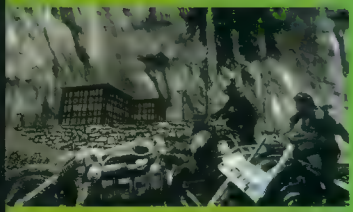
It was bound to happen, but I never imagined my first two big letdowns of 2009 would hit nearly back to back—nor that Sacred 2 or Damnation would be among them, two games I had very high hopes for. What's even stranger is that I was playing Sacred 2, trying desperately to convince myself that the clumsy animation, poor models, horrid collision, and lifeless combat would somehow dissipate, when Damnation came in to save the day. As much as I was anticipating Sacred 2, Damnation has been rattling around in the back of my head since GDC 2008. This was a game with a bold agenda and endless potential, set among massive vertical set pieces packed with acrobatics and gunplay, wrapped in a neo-western steampunk motif starring a badass soldier in a gaucho hat and a feisty half-naked mystic with major axes to grind. There's no excuse for Sacred 2's cosmetic shortcomings. They simply weren't a priority. But Damnation, well, that's another story…

The overall design is still intact, although it's been painfully scripted since we first spoke with Blue Omega back in May of 2008. Going back to that issue and reading excerpts from level designer Jacob Minkoff and producer Richard Gilbert such as, "It's about the adventure, seeing something above you and wondering how you're going to get to it and figuring out how to use your climbing abilities to get to it" … and "Damnation is about giving you the choice to attack an environment the way you want to, find your own way out of it, find how you're going to meet your directive," makes you wonder how it went so wrong. In my Darksiders preview I mention how rarely a new designer's "vision" finds its way into the final product. This is one of those sad cases where it's been tainted, either by committee, inexperience, budget, or time constraints, to the extent that it hardly resembles the original idea. At one point in the Q&A Brady refers to the studio's vision for Damnation directly, to which Richard replied, "Even though we are confident in our ideas and will defend them to the end we are still realists. We want to put this in the hands of gamers. And we're not going to say, well, you know what, they're just wrong, we know better than they do. That's arrogant and stupid." …Yup, they were new all right. Not that we didn't try and try again. The next time we'd see Damnation would be days before its release. So what went wrong? I think a better question might be, what didn't?

The platforming was supposed to hearken back to games like the original Tomb Raider. That awesome feeling of adventure you'd get studying your surroundings to find the way forward with nothing but your instinct to guide you, only on a much larger, more complex scale. The architecture is still in place to make that happen, but even with the prompts turned off (which are on black bars that obstruct your view in a tiny bland font to begin with) the gameplay is patently mechanical and the character movement tragically imprecise. The simple act of lining Rourke up to jump onto a ladder

Texture popping is frequent and lasts more than a few seconds.

Now this is more like it. Shades of the adventure that could have been.



Great design, like this crazy tri-hack steam cycle, abounds in Damnation if only all the great form were met with better function.

is marred by the awkward animation, devoid of simple routines that are just missing, along with the ability to pivot or back-pedal. He feels more like a car than a person, only without reverse, so he has to make U-turns. A simple strafe would do, but the only strafe function locks you into a shooting position that pulls in the camera and restricts your movement. Even the ledge jumping is awkward. Hanging from a ledge to jump onto the opposing ledge or pole, you can't just aim and jump. You have to line it up, hold RB and press A and let the game jump for you. I can understand not wanting to frustrate players with repositioning the camera or missing simple jumps but the end result breaks the flow, feels unnatural, and deprives the user of any sense of accomplishment. Most of the jumping is rudimentary in the first place. That sort of rigidity is prevalent in every facet of Damnation's "acrobatics."

OK, so, they wanted to make it easy and by the numbers. The shooting should be at least eventful then; the game did spring from an Unreal mod after all. No such luck. In fact, the shooting is much harder, but not because it's difficult; because it's broken. Take cover you say? Crouching behind a low wall, not only are you vulnerable, but with your reticule affixed to the enemy's head your gun points directly into the wall. You have to pop up like a target at a shooting gallery. And standing, forget it, there's no animation for taking cover or targeting from behind a wall. It's not enough that the aiming is so infuriatingly touchy that it takes painful micro-nudging to fix the reticule on an enemy (ah, rad!) or that said enemy is having no problem pelting you (they don't even bother to duck) or that they move around so erratically it's like they're in a different game…nope, they had to add even more insult to this already fatal blood gushing injury and make it take several hits to bring down even the lowliest grunt. The first shot directly in the head; that just wakes 'em up… doesn't even leave a mark. Add this fun to the no cover system and you might as well just run over and deck the guy… You might wanna cue up the Benny Hill ditty first though. What else could go wrong? Well, they wanted a seamless in-game story and they got it, only with dead motionless eyes and misshapen toothless lip-synching visages that spout cornball dialogue in what may be the worst vocal performances since, I honestly don't know when. It's nothing a battery of hypnotherapy sessions shouldn't remove, except for maybe "Zagato."

I'm not partial to having a second character meander about everywhere I go in the first place. The goal was to make the player feel engaged, but the end result has the opposite effect. In the rare instance I actually didn't know where to go and finally started to sense a hint of immersion… "Over here!" Great, thanks, yeah, I was totally lost…20 feet away. Whichever level pest you happen to be stuck with, Yukecan or Zagato, expect them to stand directly in your line of fire, jump and grab onto the same ledge and merge into Rourke, magically glitch into place should you arrive at any event first, or trigger events you don't want triggered. And don't bother leaving them for dead when they go down Gears-of-War-style (the touch me, heal me system). They always pop in at the next checkpoint. The tubular bike transitions aren't so bad at first—the bike designs are awesome—although big steam-powered flies do eventually dive bomb the ointment. It's bad enough that they handle like a 2x4s; but do I really need a passenger to shoot the serum junkies I'm whisking by? Speaking of serum would somebody please, for all that is sacred, stop looping Prescott's propaganda reels…it's been hours, literally… Can't stand against PSI, rise up, join you, new Americans, and enjoy your refreshing serum… We get it you're "fooling" them. Just stop the damn tape.

As harsh as my criticism may sound, I don't mean to disparage Blue Omega, in fact, if there is a silver lining in all this, it's them. Given the chance, would you rather succeed at making a dime-a-dozen game like, say, a top-down action/RPG? Or fail spectacularly trying to do something truly epic? By trying and falling short with a game this size, this first-time developer learned invaluable lessons that many studios never experience. Their vision was sound, but somewhere down the line the execution failed them. Whatever that failure was, they can fix it, refocus their efforts and be the better for it. Damnation isn't a tragically "bad" game. It's a tragically flawed version of what could have been a very good game. I wouldn't pay full retail for it, but if Codemasters were to drop the price like EA did with Mercenaries 2, I'd definitely give it a whirl. There's value to be had in Damnation, you just have to dig for it.

parting shot

Damnation was either going to succeed or fail on an epic level. Unfortunately, the latter applies. Blue Omega's vision is buried under so many layers of clumsy gameplay and painful cinematics that the glimmers of the game that could have been just can't stem the tide. It's certainly worth renting to see what might have been, or buying at a discount price, but otherwise, Kevin, Will, Eric and Selma—you can come out now.

FUEL

Aside from the real-time terrain deformation in Motorstorm (and a spattering of racers that simulate the effect) and Baja: Edge of Control's sprawling 10-square-mile patches of race-track-covered open earth, there hasn't been a whole lot of innovation in the off-road racing category. Open worlds with vast real-time components have given street racing a shot in the arm, but off-road racing has been pretty much more of the same with a new coat of paint.

The next big technological leap will come when THQ's MX vs ATV Reflex hits later this year, boasting dual analog control with one stick for the bike and one for the rider, and the next step in deformation where your tires are immersed in actual soft terrain into which you can dig a groove a foot deep and then roll over it an hour later. In the open-world category, however FUEL pretty much resets the standard right here, right now. Asobo has delivered, as promised, the world's largest racing environment created from actual satellite data. One-hundred-thousand miles worth of tracks, paths, and trails packed into 9,000 square miles of seamlessly streaming game world—truly a marvel to behold. But what good is size without content? Baja: EoC was huge by scale but outside of the racing (and often within) it was just so much…dirt. What makes FUEL such a breakthrough racing experience is what Asobo does both with the world and in it. Unlike any other off-road game in existence, "open-world" doesn't begin to describe it; you can't simply take off in any direction in FUEL. The world is REAL and thusly the laws of nature apply. It's exactly like hopping on a bike or into an off-road beast and heading into the nearest wilderness (if it were legal). There's no other way to describe it. Asobo spent four years on FUEL's proprietary engine and it is truly a beast; draw distance, 24 miles. Two generations ago Daytona still had pop-up.

If you want to see all 9,000 miles of it however, you're going to need a lot of stars to unlock new zones and a lot of fuel to buy the vehicles to win them. You need to win races to get stars—second place won't do—and to win races, especially as the game progresses, you need consistently more and better vehicles. The racing in FUEL is as varied as the terrain, ranging from traditional lap-based circuit races to sprawling checkpoint scrambles, and the grand daddy of them all—Raids: up to half hour long no-holds-barred-first-man-to-cross-the-finish-wins-all-out mayhem. This is where Asobo's amazing GPS really pays off, by computing the optimal path for your vehicle…not that you should follow it. Optimal doesn't necessarily mean fastest, but when you're all alone in the middle of a 30 mile race the GPS's chevron can make all the difference. It's not so great when you're racing through

a raging EF5 tornado that's flipping cars like dominos, but what is? FUEL's dynamic weather system and day/night cycle is the real thing. It's not uncommon to begin a race in the sun and finish in the rain, and sand storms, snow, rain, and blizzards are all random occurrences relative to the region. The amazing thing about the racing is that for all the variation in length, weather, and vehicle type—and if you can ride it or drive it, it's in here—they're all equally well tuned and balanced.

Which leads me to another thing I really like about FUEL—the vehicles. I don't want licensed or realistic anything. Give me monsters! I want fire breathing contraptions that look like something from the alternate Mad Max meets Motorstorm version of the present on which the game is based, like the Mechahead. And that's exactly what you get, along with physics to match, hence the well-tuned racing. Asobo spent their days making sure each vehicle's handling felt right relative to the design, weight and displacement, not making sure the '08 Ford F150 felt like a crappy '08 Ford F150, and so on.

But what if you don't want to race, or what if you can't seem to win? Take off, sir! Go find some fuel—it's all over the place—or take on a Challenge. Open Challenges are readily acceptable while others need to be discovered; yet another part of FUEL's allure (discovery!). Challenges

range in size and difficulty and shell out large amounts of fuel, so, if at first you don't succeed, earn a bunch of fuel and buy a faster vehicle or juice one that you already own, and try again. Or maybe you don't feel like competing at all. You can always look for Liveries—cool designs for your quiver of machines and gear—or seek out Vistas—easy to spot-hard to reach areas that exemplify FUEL's amazing geography. With so many vehicles and so much ground to cover there really isn't ever a dull moment. A couple of minor quibbles… Some of the MX bikes and quads feel a little heavy-handed, and for the most part don't take kindly to riding slow throttle blipping wheelies, while others just plain won't wheelie at all. Even if you roll backwards and nail the throttle...nada. No stoppies either. I'm pretty sure there's a reason for this though; likely due to the fact that the physics have to work for radically different vehicles from massive semis to nimble MXers within the same space, so, like I said—minor. I like the rider design just fine too, especially given all the insane gear and tattoos you can earn and find to personalize your dude's look; but why no female? If ever a racing/riding/driving game invited all comers, this is it, and personally I like the option anyway, especially given FUEL'S motif. What a perfect opportunity to unleash a bad-ass racerette. The having-to-place-first thing might get under your skin too, although it didn't bother me, much. They say that knowing when to respawn is key but it's not a kind placement. It's fairly common, especially on new courses, to ride or drive a good portion of a race and fall way behind due to one mistake. If it's a lap race and you have a good line there's hope, but for the most part it's better to restart. I like having to dial in each course to get the win. A lot of people labored over its every undulation to assure my good times roll, so, it's the least I can do. I don't mind a little stiff competition, as long as it's not cheap, and FUEL's AI plays pretty fair. I never did like second place anyway.

parting shot

On the whole, and it's a BIG whole, FUEL is pretty much all things, and then some (and then some more) to all people. You want Bikes, ATVs, Muscle Cars, SUVs, Buggies, Trucks…they're all in here, along with every conceivable type of race set across thousands of miles of populated ultra-realistic topography, complete with dynamic weather. And it all looks and plays spectacularly. Unless you're looking for an authentic hard core sim, there's no reason you shouldn't leave right now, and even if you are, a little FUEL might just change your mind.

Space Invaders Extreme

words Eric L. Patterson

Out of all the reasons that I had to give Space Invaders Extreme a try when it first hit for the Nintendo DS and PlayStation Portable, my top one would actually have to be a completely different game: Pac-Man Championship Edition. It was during the resurrection of good old Mr. Pac when I came to believe, more than ever before that moment, that re-imaginations of classic games could actually re-capture the wonder and amazement that I felt the first time I played their original source of inspiration.

It then didn't hurt that SIE turned out to be one heck of a game. As a project, it paid homage to the original Space Invaders, while also bringing in new ideas and ways of looking at gameplay elements that took the series in an exciting new direction. This wasn't your father's Space Invaders; the game had become far more fast-paced, combos and score modifiers kept you continually on your toes, and additions like variable weaponry for your ship and bonus stages helped provide a nice layer of depth and variety to the alien-blasting action.

While SIE was perfectly suited to the handhelds upon which it was born, those of you who prefer to do your gaming on a big-screen TV with controller in hand can now see what you've been missing thanks to the Xbox Live Arcade release of SIE.

So, how is it? Well, everything that made the game so good on the DS and PSP is still intact, but all of that now comes packed with a multiplayer mode that provides for both online and local co-op and competitive challenges as well as a few additional new options and other bonuses. (For me, now being able to completely turn off the background visuals is super sweet.)

parting shot

I still love my DS copy of Space Invaders Extreme, but this new XBLA version of the game gives us big beautiful visuals and some nifty multiplayer options for a price that's quite nice. Maybe not quite demanding a second purchase, but certainly worth a first.

Interview

Tomohiro Nishikado
President, DREAMS CO., LTD

In honor of the release of Space Invaders Extreme on the Xbox Live Arcade, we had a chance to pose some questions to Mr. Tomohiro Nishikado, the "biological father" of the original Spacer Invaders and the current CEO of DREAMS CO., LTD.

play: The impact that you had on the video game industry through your creation Space Invaders, not only upon its release but now over thirty years later, really is incredible. The industry, at that point, had to have been an exciting one to get into, because it was still a relatively new form of entertainment that nobody could say for sure where it was going. Either before Space Invaders hit, or when it had become the smash hit in Japan and abroad that it ended up becoming, could you ever have predicted not only the impact it would have, but also where the entire video game market would be 30+ years later?

Tomohiro Nishikado: I had been developing games for six years before this game, and there were only three major companies developing games in Japan at that time, so the scale was very small. However, after this game, the number of development companies increased at an amazing speed, bringing us to now. At that time I dreamed the industry would grow this much.

Even today, the "invader" characters from Space Invaders are still instantly recognizable to many people, and those characters have come to symbolize video games and the video game culture. Have you ever run into those Invader characters in places you didn't expect to see them, and even if not, how do you feel to know that those characters are still so beloved by so many people?

This makes me extremely happy. When Pac-Man character goods were being released, I proposed character goods for Space Invaders, but at the time I was rejected and told that Space Invaders, unlike Pac Man, were enemy characters and lacked in cuteness. So, the goods did not come out till much later. I am so happy to see Space invader characters loved by so many people.

You've been responsible in one way or another for many other games beyond Space Invaders, but that is the game that people most associate with you. Do you ever wish that more people knew about the other works you've created over the years?
There are some games that I produced before Space Invaders that I have an even stronger affection for. For example, a driving game called "Speed Race." It would make me very happy to see games like this played.

People now have the chance to play the Xbox Live Arcade version of Space Invaders Extreme, a game that took the idea you created so many years ago and reworked it for a whole new generation of video game players. Thinking back to what you created in the original Space Invaders, how do you feel about what the game has now evolved into in Space Invaders Extreme?
The Xbox LIVE Arcade version is something I am excited to see because it fits this generation of gamers. Having played the DS version, with its modern tempo and original gameplay elements, I think it will translate very well to the Xbox 360, particularly with the high resolution and colorful graphics, upbeat music, and the ability to have four people playing together at the same time. This will make it is a very fun game.

Thinking about classic game reworkings like Space Invaders Extreme and Pac-Man Championship Edition, how do you feel about this kind of trend? Do you wish more players would go back and better appreciate games like these in their original forms, or would you say that getting them to appreciate the basic ideas of those games through "modernized" visuals and audio is still something exciting?
I think it is good both ways. Back in the day, everyone was fascinated with the design of games like Pac-Man and Space Invaders; as simple as those games were, they were still unique. I am happy that people today can appreciate both the original game and the modernized versions of the game. It is still exciting as it re-envisions what was more technically limited back then.

Through services like Xbox Live, players from around the world can now connect and enjoy games together where they never could have before, but the face-to-face interaction of competing with others at a local arcade is lost. Have you given much thought to what the era of internet-connected game hardware has done for gaming as a whole?
As technology progresses, virtual connections will increase and expand with the time, and this has become a great way for people to connect, stay in touch, and play more games. I see games separated in categories, where online games are different from local multiplayer games. Though there are many people who are playing online, I believe there are still many, many people who enjoy individual gaming, so I don't find online gaming a negative effect. I think online gaming is a positive transition for hardware and for gamers because it has increased this connectivity between people.

"Classic" video games seem to currently be undergoing a very noticeable revival. Why do you think games like Space Invaders have regained popularity in recent years? What do games like these now have to offer both long-time video game fans, as well as the younger gamers out there who weren't even alive during those days?
Video games started to evolve from the time that Space Invaders hit, but since then, the rules of games have become increasingly complex. I have always believed that when it comes to games, the fundamental element is to have fun. But recently, as game development follows the natural path of development and advancement, the level of graphics, technology, and gameplay have changed as well. The games these days can perplex novice gamers, and I think that it is these people who are playing the simpler games of the past and are getting their taste of the fun. And of course there are those who were fans of these older games who are still playing.

There now seems to be more and more of a divide between the high-definition, extremely powerful video game hardware like the PlayStation 3 and the Xbox 360, and the less powerful yet more unique game hardware like the DS or Wii. Which, to you, is the more exciting? If you were to sit down tomorrow and come up with an idea for a new game, which direction do you think you would want to go in?
I feel that hardware functionality has advanced exceptionally, probably more so than game concepts themselves. I think this may just be a trend of the times but it seems that as the demand for higher quality graphics and sound go up, gameplay concepts are being pushed to the side and more often neglected. Of course there are games that are exceptions to this but in general, there seems to be a lot more focus on pushing the technology end of games—the graphics, the processing power—rather than the basic concept of the game. I have always found simple to be the most interesting, so I think the DS is more than enough for an interesting game.

On a more personal level, what small memory do you have regarding Space Invaders, something that maybe isn't very exciting but that you've never forgotten?
Let's see. Perhaps the time when the tires on the car Taito used to collect coins from the arcades went flat from the weight.

In the 30+ years that you've been involved in video games in one way or another, how have you seen them? Would you consider yourself a "fan," and if so, is it more from being a creator, or being a player, or both? Or are video games for you simply a career?
I think of games as my work. I think that if game creators play games as a hobby, their games will inevitably be influenced by a more saturated environment that would make it impossible to create a unique game. There were many people like that around me. Of course I think that it is important to play games, but I think it is necessary to objectively analyze what makes a game interesting or what is wrong with it, in order to create games that people can enjoy. When a game developer is immersed in gaming as a hobby, I feel it can create an illusion that their games are the most interesting, and lose the ability to objectively view the overall concept and fun factor.

In relation to that, can I ask: not including anything you yourself have worked on, what is your favorite game from the past, and what is the most recent game you have played that you enjoyed?
For past games, I'd probably say Pac-Man. As for recently, I found Nintendo's Rhythm Tengoku to be fun and exhilarating.

Finally, is there anything you'd like to tell our readers? Maybe something they don't know about you, or Space Invaders?
The hardware capabilities for Space Invaders were extremely limited, and didn't allow me to include the specifications I had hoped for, which forced me to complete the game unfinished. Also, up until that point I had chosen the titles for all of the games I created, but with this game the title was decided by someone else and for a number of years I really didn't feel any affection for the game. However, the fact that even after 30 years people still play it has recently made me realize that I may have made a good game.

With the limited abilities of the hardware of the past, creators tried their best to extend those abilities to the fullest, but nowadays, hardware has become highly sophisticated. My hope is that from here on the creators out there trying to create games will not give in to this sophistication and create intrinsically fun games.

Thank you for your time and your answers. It is much appreciated.

"With the limited abilities of the hardware of the past, creators tried their best to extend those abilities to the fullest."

System: PS3 | Developer: Compile Heart/Idea Factory | Publisher: NIS America | ESRB: Teen | Available: May 26

When worlds collide

words Dave Halverson

Do you ever wonder where discarded thoughts go? ...All those random notions and ideas that never amount to anything? Of course you don't, which makes it the perfect place to stage a video game starring a mash-up of characters from all over the JRPG kingdom. Joining the likes of Demitri, Morrigan, Lilith, and Felicia from Capcom's Darkstalkers are Etna and Prinny from Nippon Ichi's Disgaea; Zelos and Meu from Idea Factory's Spectral Souls; and a cluster of characters from the world of Gust including Raze, Lily, and Whim from Mana Khemia 2; Marie from Atelier Marie; and Lyner, Aurica, Misha, and Shurelia from Ar Tonelico: Melody of Elemia. You'll meet a few fresh faces too, beginning with York and Miko, whose walk home from high school on this particular day takes a detour into a paradoxical dream world where they meet a strange little girl named May, who casually asks for their assistance in a matter regarding the celestial beings gobbling down the souls of every being in the known cosmos—human, fantasy and demon alike. Until now these souls had always shown up sans physical form, ripe for the gulping. But York and Miko have come through the void intact, which can only mean one thing: it's time to lay the smack down on the powers that be before they suck the galaxy dry. Luckily, May can sense invisible souls that have crossed over, so off they go to liberate them and in the process draw out whomever or whatever is scarfing down life-force like Freedom Fries.

Cross Edge is quite the unique RPG experience. Each area of the world, comprised of three main landmasses analogous with the souls they contain, is devoid of any conditions or manifestations of any kind. Any lost souls, Events, or refuges are uncovered by exploration, activating May's radar to scan subsequently larger areas

> "I found myself increasingly engaged by characters on both sides of the story..."

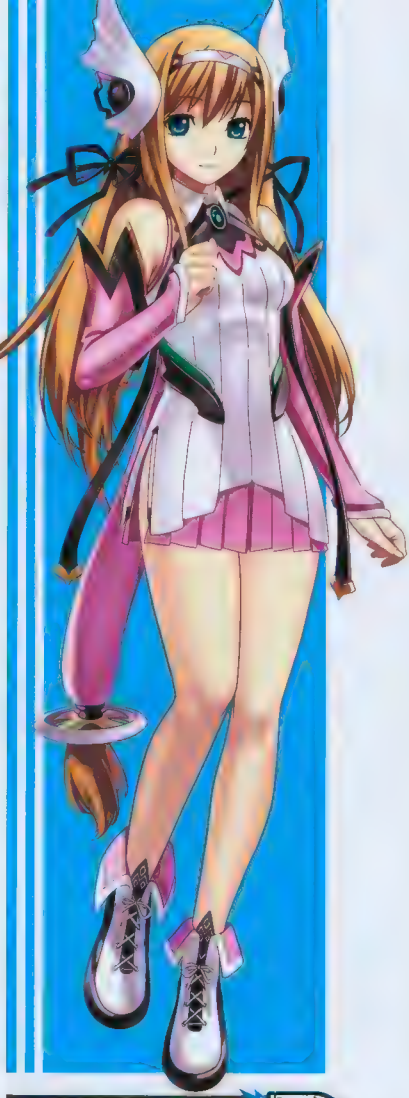
around your party, which means you need to explore every inch of each world to essentially discover the RPG within. It sounds tedious, but each plain is relatively small considering the over-world sprite du jour, York, is Godzilla-sized in scale. Other than the turn-based fighting, nearly the entire game plays out on the over-world maps. The only "areas" in Cross Edge are the towers, hideouts and mansions you discover to set up shop and manage your characters, and the 5-6 screen long side-scrolling dungeons (that load from screen to screen for some strange reason) that link each plain. The story plays out by way of anime-style character cut-outs over static backgrounds and verbal exchanges featuring the super cool 2D sprite versions of each character. You gotta give it up to any developer or publisher confident (or crazy) enough to release an original RPG on PS3 where the only 3D elements are the backgrounds in the battles, a few screens worth of side-scrolling, and select enemy creatures that appear randomly with their mostly sprite-based counterparts. Not to say that Idea Factory doesn't utilize the PS3; they absolutely do, but only as they see fit as it pertains to their constituents—and these companies know their audience like Colonel knows chicken. Cross Edge shines where Cross Edge needs to shine for anime fans that play games and Japanese RPG fans that frequent any of the series the characters in Cross Edge represent. They may even pick up a few new believers this time around, due to the predominantly female cast, although aside from Morrigan (whose boobs gently undulate even as a diminutive 2D sprite), they're not exactly what most would consider "sexy." I'm partial to Felicia, Misha, Marie, and Lilith myself. I'm down with Morrigan too, although all that boobage and no sign of a nipple makes me a bit nervous.

The rate at which you encounter new characters as you venture forward, coupled with the deftly written and spoken dialogue that paints each one just as you'd imagine, will keep the usual suspects glued to Cross Edge's story, and the super sticky Action Battle System and endless character management will keep even the most ardent RPG tinkerer busy for days on end. You don't merely gain levels and upgrade equipment in Cross Edge—there are systems to the systems and the fighting is an art unto itself. You might get by playing by happenstance and sheer level grinding, but to truly

excel and get the most out of Cross Edge you need to understand how to utilize composite materials and synthesis recipes relative to each character's attacks, magic, skills and armor (along with too many other components to list) and become one like Grasshopper with the Action Battle System, which is no easy task. It's easy enough to grasp, but to deal maximum damage and see maximum 2D sprites engulfed in vivid pyrotechnics you need to master Formation, Switching Skills and characters during the Action Count, Branching and (especially) Extra Combos, Break Arts and a bunch of other techniques that sound boring but are highly effective. I've never found a tactical RPG compelling enough to master intricate systems that involve countless recipes and tomes of arbitrary science. I've played through them with a fair knowledge of how to win but never to the extent that I'd recognize how a certain compound might affect Ayatane's Zweihander versus Lyner's Bastard Sword.

I didn't think I would at the outset of Cross Edge either, but I found myself increasingly engaged by characters on both sides of the story—evil doers (notably Mimi and Augustine) and my merry band alike—frighteningly addicted to its myriad systems and increasingly more consumed by its battle system as the game wore on. Fight after fight, level after level, as I stuffed my Arcane Tome with more chains than a Hells Angels rally and seared all the fantasy crap into my inventory that money could buy, my diktat went from winning to utter domination as I cut through wave after wave of celestial beasties, and ultimately the bane of the known worlds. As with any RPG at some point the allure of technology (or a lack thereof) slips away, leaving only its core elements to finish the job, and at its core Cross Edge is like a big slab of RPG and anime fan service.

It says a lot, to me at least, that Cross Edge became the second RPG I've stuck with this generation (joining Blue Dragon), chewing up nearly every evening in May and ingraining the battle hymn in my frontal lobe for all eternity in the process. Thankfully it's a good one, along with an OST that merges orchestral, techno and metal arrangements as only the Japanese can. For as long as my party kept growing and evolving, the story and the gameplay kept giving, and you really can't ask for a whole lot more from an RPG…other than rich 7th generation visuals. Makes you wonder what these guys could do if they embraced the day's technology…I'm sure the competition does every day.



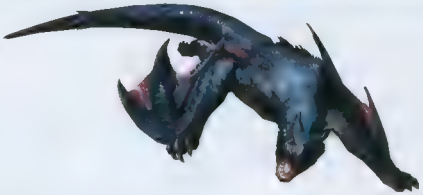
parting shot

I'm not wild about Cross Edge's new male protagonist, York (the Japanese game had a female lead) but the original female character Miko is all kinds of dull (but strong), so I'll call it even. Cross Edge is also the second most technologically wanting game on the PS3 following Disgaea 3…which also happens to be an excellent game. It's never been about technology with these games and somehow it still works, exceedingly so with Cross Edge. Once again, Idea Factory, Compile Heart, and NIS America get it done through quality localization, a finely tuned array of systems, endearing characters, a wicked cool OST, and the seemingly unending power of the 2D spriteling.

review | System: PSP | Developer: Capcom Production Studio 4 | Publisher: Capcom | ESRB: Teen | Available: June 23, 2009

Monster Hunter Freedom Unite

The Great Game has arrived. Real life now seems terribly obsolete.



Freedom Unite is the full flowering of the *Monster Hunter* franchise and is, in some sense, the "ultimate game." It is pure action-oriented strategy, resource management, and a series of hellishly brutal boss encounters. And there's nothing like wearing the armored hide of a slain monster: Victory, once achieved, can fill you with a blinding white-hot emotion comparable to what a parent might feel during the birth of a firstborn.

New monsters, new gear, a new environment, the ability to port your old Freedom 2 character—that's great, but the true newness lies in the inclusion of a Felyne sidekick. Depending on how you train the Felynes, they can beat ass, toss bombs, heal you, gather extra resources, and just be useful in general. But he's **only** a sidekick, and is never going to leap on top of a dragon's head and sacrifice his life to land a killing blow. My Felyne, the poor bastard, often ended up laid out like he was practicing being in the morgue, his little fuzzy face scrunched up in agony. I loved having him along, but was confused as to why I wasn't given the freedom to name him. I ended up hanging with some doofus named "Peter" rather than kickin' it with Toilet Head or Defenestration Freak, as I would have liked. **Kyle Stiff**

parting shot

Freedom Unite is like the cube from *Hellraiser* that takes you to a world of ultimate pain and pleasure. The only major flaw: Capcom gives us ad hoc gameplay with local friends, but no real online multiplayer support. How many units does a franchise have to sell before you throw us a bone?

System: NDS | Developer: Backbone Entertainment | Publisher: EA | ESRB: Everyone | Available: August 11, 2009

G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra

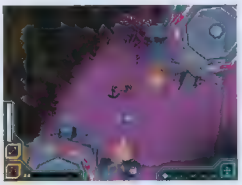
Knowing is half the battle

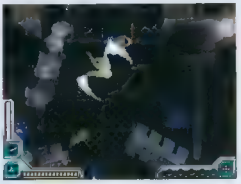
Movie-based titles want to score the biggest bang for their buck while their film counterparts are still fresh in folk's minds. Because of this quick-hit mentality, you'll often find the latest Pixar-based game landing on everything but your George Foreman grilling machine. In the past, this was bad news because everything below the platform the title was built on was a watered-down port. More recently, though, publishers have been delivering dedicated versions of these licensed titles that embrace the strengths of a particular platform. This is the approach Electronic Arts is taking with G.I Joe Rise of Cobra, and it looks like it's paying off.

Going with a fast-action, arcadey style, Backbone Entertainment—whose Space Invaders Extreme proved they know how to make classics feel fresh—is crafting an accessible top-down shooter for Joe's DS debut. Whether behind the guns of any of the 11 playable characters—six Joe, five Cobra—or manning the cockpit of a vehicle or turret, the controls felt responsive and satisfying in my demo build. Transitioning from primary and secondary firing modes was also a breeze. Backbone avoided gimmicky stylus play in favor of intuitive button inputs, but have utilized the lower screen to display the map—smart move!

"It's looking like [Joe's] twitchy, old-school appeal could make for some fun portable Cobra-killin'."

The game lacks some of the charm we'd like out of a G.I. Joe entry simply because the graphical limitations of the hardware keep the appealing campiness of the series' over-the-top characters in check. Still, the ability to unleash character-specific moves, like Heavy Duty's self-explanatory "Devastation" attack, certainly adds some Joe flavor. Based on my brief time with the title, it's looking like its twitchy, old-school appeal could make for some fun portable Cobra-killin'. **Matt Cabral**





System: NDS | **Developer:** Atlus | **Publisher:** Atlus | **Multi:** 1 Player | **ESRB:** Teen | **Available:** June 23, 2009 review

Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Survivor

Devil surviving, handheld style

Last issue, I came to you with the questions and concerns I had surrounding Atlus and their decision to bring the Shin Megami Tensei series to the DS as a strategy RPG. The initial time I had spent with Devil Survivor, the result of that decision, had been completely positive, and I wondered if the game would be able to purge me of the various hesitations that I held.

I am happy to return to you to say that, even as somebody who isn't always an SRPG fanatic, Devil Survivor is a hell of an experience. The mixing of genres the folks at Atlus have concocted here really is a pleasing blend, and the idea comes together thanks to all of the work that went into crafting an enjoyable game even when you're not buried waist-deep in combat with classic franchise demons. There really is a lot presented to you, the player, beyond just battles, and this is where Devil Survivor shows itself off as a deeper and more varied experience than a lot of other SRPGs end up striving for.

Okay, so the game does unfortunately allow itself to fall into a few of the all-too-common trappings from the SRPG world, most specifically the occasional reliance on battle objectives that demand step-by-step solutions instead of more personalized tactics. That's fine, though; once Devil Survivor's storyline kicks in and the game really starts to hit its stride in the first couple of hours, the random bouts of frustration are overshadowed by what is otherwise a top-tier title. **Eric L. Patterson**

parting shot

A stylish and sinister strategy RPG that is indeed worthy of the Shin Megami Tensei monicker.

System: NDS | **Developer:** Grasshopper | **Publisher:** Marvelous/XSEED | **Multi:** 1 Player | **ESRB:** Teen | **Available:** June 23, 2009 review

Flower, Sun, and Rain

Lospass Island; making Silent Hill look like Disneyland

As I sit here, trying to type out my review for Flower, Sun and Rain, I am almost at a complete loss as to what exactly I should be saying. Put simply, this was one of the most bizarre, confusing, and at times nonsensical games that I have played in a long, long time.

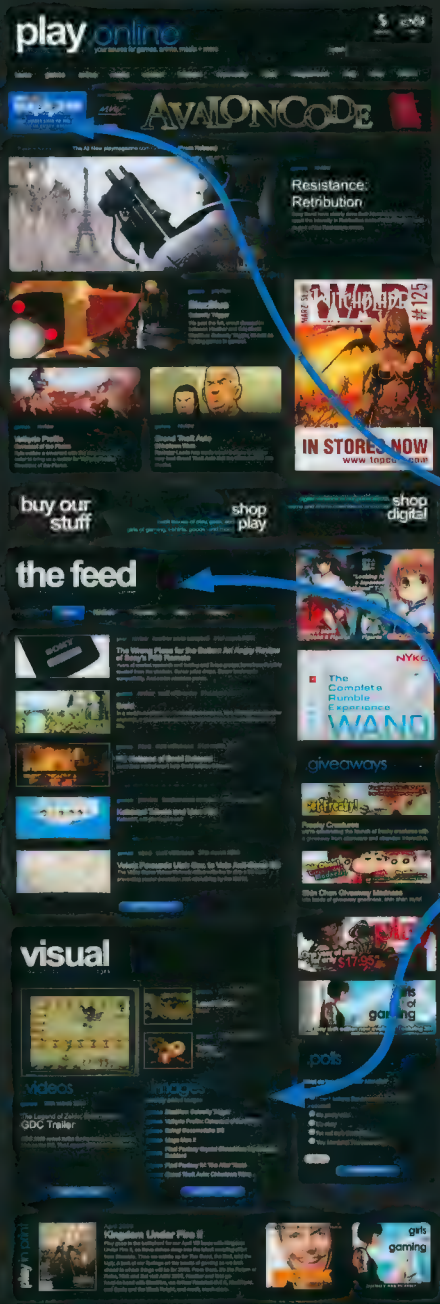
And that, precisely, is why I enjoyed it to the level that I did.

Playing FSR is like watching a dream unfold on your DS; events and characters and locations are brought together without any logic to their connections, and yet, that complete lack of logic is in itself logical, just as the best dreams we have are a seemingly random series of events that make perfect sense at that moment. Expert "searcher" Mondo, our hero, seems way too calm about the hellish insanity he finds on Lospass Island, but his demeanor is exactly what helps us stay sane through it all. Sane, that is, until you realize that while as a game, FSR is sometimes great and sometimes only okay, we might actually be the game, and FSR might, in fact, be the one who is playing us.

I cannot, with any clear conscience, recommend Flower, Sun and Rain to everyone. Simply put, some of you would try it and then swear that your DS is possessed by some spirit hell-bent on driving you mad. But for those of you out there who can appreciate the surreal and enchanting mind-trips that gaming's weirdest efforts allow us to experience, a flight to Lospass Island would give you one crazy ride. **Eric L. Patterson**

parting shot

Flower, Sun and Rain is a great remedy for those pesky times that you start to actually feel sane and rational.



Welcome to the all-new

play.online magazine

your source for games, anime, media + more

Join the revolution at playmagazine.com

Our biggest and best web project yet: the all-new **play** online, your complete source for games, anime, media, and more on the internet. We've worked hard to bring you an amazing website, one packed not only with the thought-provoking and inciteful written content you've come to expect from **play** magazine, but also a whole list of exciting new features.

Here's a small sample of what you'll find on the new **play** online.

the feed

A sampling of the exclusive content recently featured on play online.

The Uncut BlazBlue Discussion

Get the full-length version of Heather and Eric's discussion on [illegible] entire state of the fighting game genre. (search: "blazblue discussion")

The Mad World of PlatinumGames

Matt Williamson takes a special look at PlatinumGames in honor of [illegible] MadWorld for the Wii. (search: "platinumgames")

Talking Shop with Jimmy Palmiotti

play online gets a special interview with comic writer Jimmy Palmiotti [illegible] Girl, the Last Resort, and more. (search: "jimmy palmiotti")

Art Style: PiCTOBiTS

A little BiT goes a long way

As seems to happen with the launch of any major digital download service, DSiWare is off to a somewhat slow start. Other than chopped-up bits of full retail games, there haven't been a lot of truly exciting releases hit here in North America, especially with one of the service's best offerings, Moving Notepad, still nowhere to be seen for us folks outside of Japan.

Well, that is, nothing truly exciting until Art Style: PiCTOBiTS, a stellar new puzzle title that is all the proof you'll need as to why DSiWare is going to be something to pay attention to. Colored puzzle pieces fall from the sky, and you must collect pixel blocks to complete the pieces so that they'll fully pixelize and disappear. When they do, their pixels fly up to the top screen, filling in a beloved Nintendo character's retro 8-bit sprite. All of this unfolds in conjunction with remixes of classic NES beats, put together by the Japanese chiptune group YMCK.

PiCTOBiTS is the first must-own DSiWare title, so if you still have your free 1000 DSiWare points just sitting around untouched (like I did), it's time to dust them off and put them to some good use. **Eric L. Patterson**

parting shot

Give us more DSiWare titles like PiCTOBiTS, and the world will be a happy place.

"PiCTOBiTS is the first must-own DSiWare title..."

play is proud to review games on ALIENWARE
powered by NVIDIA

System: PC | Developer: Hi-Rez Studios | Publisher: Hi-Rez Studios | Multi: Massively | Available: Q4 2009

Global Agenda

Dismantle the Commonwealth

"I often describe him as the eccentric self-made millionaire," proclaims Todd Harris, Executive Producer at Hi-Rez Studios, of the company's founder. Serial entrepreneur Erez Goren developed games in high school, but put his passion on hold to make his fortune developing business software. Finally in a position to properly build his dream MMO, Erez founded Hi-Rez Studios in 2005 and now leads the design of Global Agenda, a forthcoming third-person shooter/MMO hybrid. Todd and Erez have shared this vision for years.

"Erez used to write games for the early Atari computer systems; I think he even got one published for the 2600. Then the '80s game crash happened and he switched over to biz software for a while, started some companies. That's where I came in. I was writing games in college too, so

he's been doing all this to make a serious game one day—and now he has considerable funds for it. It was time put a MMO team together."

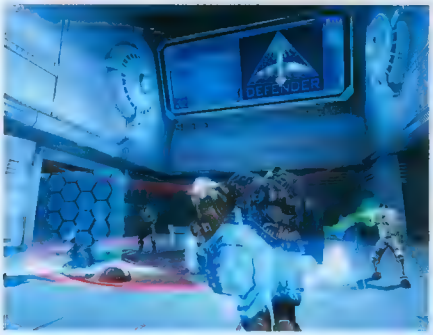
The vision did not entail throwing a lot of money at a game and hoping for the next World of Warcraft. "We're big PC gamers: Action games, shooters, strategy games. We really want to bring those classic experiences into a MMO," Todd explains. It all started rolling with Erez, also lead designer, and a team of sharp programmers. Several engine suites were explored before Unreal Engine 3 was selected.

"The genre and technology were kind of dictated by our gameplay goals. We wanted fast-paced objectives and third-person shooter combat where teamwork is really core, and this helped to sculpt our mission format. Another goal, from the MMO advancement side: we wanted to always have new gear for players to acquire, master and specialize. So high-tech science fiction seemed to be a good theme to support that. We wanted

Todd Harris, Executive Producer

Todd's development philosophy is 'Iterate toward fun from Day 1' which means a new build of the game is play-tested every single day. As Studio Head, he manages the talented, ultra-creative Hi-Rez Studios staff while trying to ensure they do not drive the founder crazy, and vice versa.

"...third-person shooter combat where teamwork is really core."



Chris Larson, Lead Programmer

Chris dreamed of working on games since getting his first Commodore 64. Today, he leads the programming team and adds the 'MMO bits' to Global Agenda, including character inventory, skills, agency management, economy, and more. If it's broke, Chris will fix it.

player-driven world, rather than a very scripted or exploration-based MMO, and we kind of took some cues from EVE Online in that area. That led us to the concept of player Agencies and alliances. It's this idea I sometimes call Spy-Fi, where it's science fiction with a bit of intrigue, and player drama over territory."

Hi-Rez grew to 45 strong, attracting very well regarded concept artists to help drive the vision, and fiction writers worked with them to birth a conflict and back story that would anchor Global Agenda's action in a convincing setting. Todd describes the direction: "It was very important to have meaning and context for the combat, so it's not just a series of maps strung together. For this, we kind of drew inspiration from the way classic strategy board games provide context to a region. And this led us to the concept of regional and world domination in a destabilized future world."

As soon as you enter the world, you're sent through a tutorial and story exposition in a series of private instances that you can complete at your own pace, guided by helpful and enlightening voice over."It's introducing you to the basics of control and shooter gameplay, and you're getting a taste of each class before you have to pick one. Contextually, at this point your agent is escaping the clutches of the Commonwealth government." It's 2155, and after a Third World War devastates an already waning planet, the Commonwealth steps in. This faction, a wealthy and oppressive renegade government based off the coast of Africa, represents the primary foil for the player.

"Things went real bad, " Todd recounts. "This NPC faction gathers people up in George Orwell/ big brother-fashion, as world governments in science fiction novels are known to do; providing security at the cost of liberty. Their HQ is the major mega-city in the world now." Most of your saviors are slaughtered during the escape to the outskirts of Commonwealth City, but you're not the only fugitive in this rising rebellion. There are also three secondary factions, each with social areas, dotted across the globe, from Antarctica to secret subterranean desert compounds. These parties also oppose the Commonwealth, however they're not exactly your comrades. Consider them equal opportunity dissidents. "These guys are the resistance, but it's more like vendor, storyteller, immersive NPCs for the player to soak in. Don't worry; you won't have to faction-up with them or anything."

Before departing Commonwealth City to discover the other towns and outposts, you'll be given a retribution mission to avenge your fallen liberators, which ultimately rewards you with class selection. Todd tells me they get a lot of feedback (from the thousand or so testers currently playing) comparing the feel of Global Agenda to Team Fortress 2: citing the strong class distinctions married to kinetic shooter gameplay, instead of generic soldiers with different load outs. These copiously armored and eminently progressive futuristic agents will come in Assault, Robotics, Medic, and Recon flavors.

Your Assault build could go a number of ways, from super damage absorption, to all out AoE offense, heavy resistance and self-heals, or a mad katana melee fiend. The Robotics class is a device deployment master, able to lay down stuff like replenishing dispensers, sensors to reveal stealth enemies, helper droids, and powerful automated turrets in rocket, machine gun, and plasma varieties. "He has one droid called the Beholder, deploys and fires quickly, and it's not stationary. It's a great defense against Recons coming out of stealth and attacking their installations," explains the studio chief.

Smart Recons will take advantage of a selection of visual decoys to lure the attention of players and droids while they quickly drop out of stealth to slap EMP charges on the Robotic's nearby toys. It's reminiscent of the spiteful relationship between Spy and Engineer players in Team Fortress 2. Stealth will have its limitations in PVE, however. "In a lot of MMOs you can stealth all the way through a mission to the boss. So in some of our missions, especially the ones where you're supposed to mop 'em up, we'll sometimes bring guards you skipped into a boss encounter to help him out. We have a lot of old school PVE boss battles with phases and tricks."

One may get bruised by these bosses without a good Medic. Like all classes in Global Agenda, the good doctor can fire a weapon to inflict pain, however they'll blast team mates as well: with healing guns from afar, healing grenades that splash an area boost, healing terminals, and a channel gun (similar to the Medic in TF 2) that burst heals and buffs stats. Medic players are sure to hear plenty of "Heal me!" from teammates through the game's built-in voice chat.

Specializing is going to enhance everything your class is good at, including the use of weapons and devices. "We have a huge set of in-hand devices based on different damage types that draw off your main power, and all classes also have a slot for melee, which doesn't consume power. Then we have another massive selection of off-hands that don't consume power, but rather are based on more traditional MMO refresh timers. Of course you can do all sorts of things with your RPG skills to modify those effects and timers, and every single class can spec out to a bunch of different builds," Todd illustrates. Of course connecting an attack may also follow through with more effects. "Like if I'm using a Recon and sword and I nail a backstab, that could do a damage-over-time with poison."

Regardless of class, everyone gets to use jet packs to zip around levels. Since it taps your main power, it's mainly used for shorter flights. You can also wall jump and ledge grab up platforms, lending the Global Agenda shooter experience further skill and speed. Most PVE and PVP missions and matches are like quick shooter rounds: 10 to 20 minutes of focused action. Contribution metrics monitor dozens of statistics, and in the case of PVE missions (available in normal, expert and elite difficulties), loot rewards come with the completion of stages within a mission. PVP matches can be queued into from any major world hub, and like the PVE stuff, players can drop in to a round whether they're solo or in a carefully pre-formed party (typically 2, 4, 8, or 12 per group). There are no segmented servers in Global Agenda; it's all one massive cluster. So don't worry about picking the right server to play with friends, because everyone is just a sub-orbital drop ship ride away—a quick loading screen with a cool video of the vessel taking off.

One of Global Agenda's most promising features is its alliance campaigns. "This is the giant board game of territory control," Todd enthusiastically details. "One of the operations you can execute is a Base Raid, where my alliance is attacking your alliance. It requires 60 people to be effective, but those 60 people are divided up into six different strike teams—all in different maps, different chunks of that base which affect each other in real time. Let's say one team successfully shuts off the generator in A1? The defensive turrets in A2 go down and that strike team can move in a seize it."

Global Agenda is entering beta later this year, and all signs indicate this may be a deep and progressive MMO with a solid action game that could stand on its own in any modern shooter. With expanded social features being planned like private HQs for player agencies, it's clear that we now have another major player in a burgeoning MMO-shooter renaissance.

preview | **System:** PC | **Developer:** Zero Point Software | **Publisher:** Zero Point Software | **Multi:** 4p co-op | **Available:** 2009

Interstellar Marines

A quantum of cooperative energy

The Interstellar Timeline

2006: Denmark's Zero Point Software, then comprised of just four dudes in a basement with no track record, no funding, and very little tech, stuns the gaming world with a remarkable concept trailer for Interstellar Marines. Over three million downloads later, a horde of publishers contact the developer, expressing great interest in the sci-fi shooter. A couple of key private investors sign on, and suddenly the pipe dream of four friends is legitimized. "[Interstellar Marines] has to be created. I have to play it," affirms Kim Haar Jorgensen, the game's director and ZPS co-founder. "It's the dream of my every waking moment."

The dream concept: Think of that game with great open levels, a game with a kick ass skill system, another with fantastic combat, and another with excellent co-op gameplay. Bundle them up and exploit them fully in an epic sci-fi shooter trilogy. "The lesson of the trailer is that gamers, through their interest, can leverage the development of a game. In principle, a game of any size, if only the interest is big enough," the developer said. Interstellar Marines enters production.

2008: The game shows well in private meetings at GDC in Germany, where the team carefully reveals its baby to potential partners. They tout the game's complex sci-fi world and art direction, an uncompromising standard for immersion and narrative, its rich arsenal of 27 different weapons, and the comprehensive four player cooperative gameplay. Someone looking at the bottom line might only see a "co-op shooter," so what else separates IM from games like Gears of War 2 or Left 4 Dead?

"We've played both Gears 2 and L4D, both really cool games. We believe, however, that there's more to be had from co-op—like the character development system in IM," Kristian Wanek, Interstellar Marines' Producer, tells **play**. "Imagine the same cool co-op gameplay from the games you mentioned, but add the opportunity to specialize your character, so you get to supplement each other's skills, weapons and equipment. Then spice it up with a story that's designed to feature up to four main characters instead of one main character and three sidekicks. This gives you a feel of what co-op means in IM." Publishers love the ideas, dollar signs flashed in their eyes, and franchise plans were whispered. ZPS goes into a media black-out. Publisher hunting meets soul searching.

2009: The honeymoon is over before it begins. After a lengthy round of negotiations with potential suitors, Zero Point Software, now a stronger 20+ person team, decides to step off the publisher treadmill. The realities of the industry hit home. "They will take the IP, take the lion's share of the revenues, and basically leave scraps for you as the independent developer," laments Kristian. ZPS decides to fight for its IP. "If we want to do this, and if we want to do this right, we have to do it ourselves."

Interstellar Marines is a major AAA production at this point, a sweeping sci-fi trilogy powered by a cutting-edge engine. ZPS has spawned a cult following, but fans only have so much sway; they can't very well pay to have this game made. Or can they? Starting with that initial trailer, the developer realized, it's the community that pushed the game this far. Why not move ahead together? And thus AAA Indie is born, as Zero Point taps into the energy of its fans.

Like a pre-order of faith, the community can commit support and cash to Interstellar Marines right now to ensure its full and proper development. In return, different donation levels will bestow the "investor" with perks. The highest tier, for example, known as the Spearhead rank, will provide you will free digital copies of all three games in the IM trilogy as they release, 48-hour early access to each one, customized profiles, and an in-game Spearhead emblem for your marine's uniform—all for forty bucks. Lower level donations provide various benefits and titles, many revolving around Zero Point's commitment to transparency between fans and the development team—with extensive dev blogs and videos at every stage of production, demonstrating where those donations are going. After all, times are tough and who knows what the future holds…

2025: The International Space Station is all but abandoned under the stress of bleak economic and energy woes, but the Moon proves to be fertile for academic expansion. By the mid-21st century, joint Chinese-European lunar research bases are established.

2080: Space is finally commercialized as the Japanese-built station "Hotel Dawn" opens its doors to a wealthy clientele seeking deluxe vacations in orbit. A dozen more will follow, and soon the aerospace industry skyrockets. Plans are approved for low-G manufacturing, mining and tourism on the moon.

2096: Leveraging the economic and military might of several allied European countries, the Interstellar Treaty Organization (ITO) is ratified. Its goal: the pursuit of peaceful expansion into space.

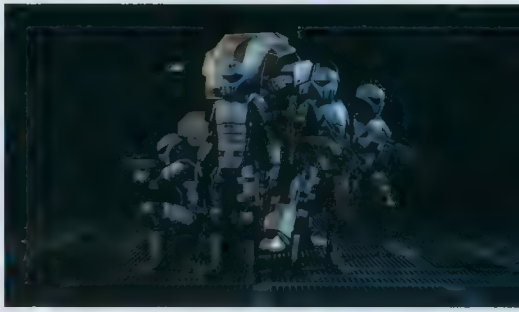
2097: The International Space Station is retrofitted with sophisticated modules and expanded labs for the purpose of new high energy experiments.

2100: The team of scientists aboard the ISS successfully produces a quantum of energy by converting the fabric of space-time itself. Zero Point Energy, a concept once proposed by Einstein, is finally realized.

A second experiment goes awry, jettisoning the two million ton station into deeper space. After a ten month search and chase, ISS scientists are rescued by ITO special forces Diagnostics reveal the Zero Point experiment produced the equivalent of about 86% of the energy of every powerplant in human history.

2121: The ITO's next great expansion. All member nations (now numbering over 80) are granted Zero Point Energy reactors. Many countries that wouldn't budge on key negotiations are swayed by this gift of unlimited energy.

The ITO now controls almost all aerospace territory, accounting for over 70% of space traffic. There's been a massive growth in science and space exploration using the new energy source. Huge mining facilities are built on Mars and distant asteroid belts. This new era of expansion requires serious policing to maintain order, and that's where the Interstellar Marines come in.



A LANDMARK FOR LANDSHARKS

Players will enter the known universe as rookie marines, but as Kristian alluded to earlier, Zero Point wants you to mold that character into a specialized soldier as the story advances in the campaign, a tale built for four. Earned experience will unlock new skills, abilities and superior guns (of course!), and the team is planning a broad range of equipment to pursue, often designed with teamwork in mind. The goal is to give all players in the party opportunities to choose brute power, stealth, hacking, robot control, etc., to successfully complete objectives from multiple angles.

IM's skill advancement system runs parallel to vast weapon specialization. You could build out a [illegible]. Your sniper could be advanced into explosives expertise, wear heavy armor, and rock with a scoped [illegible] skills and a righteous auto-shotgun. Like RPG character experimentation, this ever-expanding pool of abilities, weapons and utilities will have players seeking out that perfect build and coming back for more.

I asked Kristian if he's counting on players to replay the game for these character elements, for the [illegible] provides that? Well, I've already mentioned the social aspect of it. If you had a really cool experience with a couple of friends playing through a level, that's already plenty of reason to come back. [illegible] to his full potential in the first playthrough? Did you miss out on cool gameplay options because you [illegible]

This begs the question: will Interstellar Marines feature more open-ended levels, or closely scripted? "The levels of IM are indeed open-ended, but his is not S.T.A.L.K.E.R or Fallout 3…to [illegible] Different actions points have different approaches, and how you approach it determines how it plays out. In other words, it'll be close to impossible to play the same level over two times and get the [illegible] the world that may help or harm, depending on the situation and enemy. How will they react if you kill [illegible]

Among a myriad of potentially destabilizing problems at the space stations, outposts and mines peppered across the game's solar system, a major R&D organization is now in the business of biological mutations. The firm is merging and boosting the genes of top predators to create vicious hybrids, such as the fantastic shark creature you see on these pages. Obviously they must be stopped. Don't worry about these monsters leaping out of a closet when you trigger that one spot on the floor; the AI algorithms that keep guards patrolling and personnel doing chores will also imbue nastier inhabitants with their own lurking and hunting moods. Players can also acquire a Titan Walker, [illegible]

[illegible] approve of a four player co-op shooter with cool character advancement, open-ended levels [illegible] Gronborg's first soundtrack works are also very impressive (rather James Horner-esque), and the early voice talent seems promising. Now Zero Point Software needs you to believe.

[illegible]

to four main characters instead of one main character and three sidekicks."

Kristian Wanek, Producer

www.playmagazine.com

System: PC | **Developer:** Cryptic Studios **Publisher:** Atari | **Multi:** Massively Multiplayer | **Available:** September

Champions Online

So you've heard the news: Champions Online has been interpreted to a new September 1st release date. This extra summer stretch is apparently critical bonus time for Cryptic Studios to polish the massively multiplayer superhero game up to its standards. Given the developer's track record of famously smooth launches, the delay is undoubtedly justified. Cryptic and publisher Atari have been somewhat muted regarding the fate of the Xbox 360 version. Last we heard, Cryptic said it was altogether possible, from a technical perspective, to allow PC and Xbox 360 folks to play together—however game balance would be the determining factor there. My beta experience in the PC version revealed a spirited MMO clearly inspired by its console adaptations.

As you can see on this page, one of the best parts of Champions Online is the awesome character creator. Your knowledge of the Champions universe isn't essential here, since you're making a ridiculously customizable original hero and the Champions world is, after all, waiting to be discovered within. It's all about total body and face morphology combined with a huge selection of skin, hair, hoods, horns, helmets, masks, visors, tats, shoulders, chests, wings, capes, arms, elbows, gloves, claws, swords, belts, tails, shorts, skirts, pants, boots, heels, sneakers, talons and hooves. Every part can be colored and assigned a texture type (skin, metallic, etc.). You'll

"...bolting across the lovely Millennium City with super jumps, rocket boots and ice slides."

also assign hues and emanation points for your powers (blue laser beams from that third eye on your forehead? Sure!), and choose a suitable hero stance.

A big decision during this wonderfully time-consuming superhero creation is your Origin, the base framework of stats reflecting your character's MO and your initial Power sets. I seem to gravitate almost exclusively towards tanks and healers in online titles recently, so I built a huge muscle man encased in brilliant metallic black and dark blues, with a pair of massive goat hooves for feet! I chose the Powerhouse origin and stacked him up with short range Unarmed Combat abilities and Power Armor, built to soak damage and stomp. In fact, my success in combat depends on continuing the barrage, as key attacks empower my next wallop with more damage potential and stronger or longer stuns and debuffs. You're going to be charging-up some attacks before release as well, R-Type-style. Dodging and blocking are also active and essential in Champions, especially when an enemy prepares to unleash its own power attack.

You'll still have to focus on well-timed triggering of abilities like traditional MMOs, but Champions is much more reliant on reactions, avatar positioning and intelligent prioritizing of specific enemies (very console-friendly movement and pacing). I can see where ranged zappers might have an easier time of it attacking a herd of enemies, but I happen to enjoy a sound positional game when it comes to MMO combat, and Champions Online will make those brawlers, karate masters and samurais earn their kills. What I really enjoy about this combat system is the "momentum" built into one's energy bars, preventing you from ever running completely dry. You'll always have enough in the tank for your core attacks, and using these powers immediately re-initiates the creation of more attack power. It's a pleasant renewal process that keeps you firmly entrenched in the techniques of combat, not quaffing potions or waiting impatiently.

Like almost any RPG skill system, it benefits players to keep pumping advancement into a more narrow spectrum of abilities to really milk them for all they're worth, but Champions Online never locks you in; if you want to compliment your fireballs with a machine gun, work down that path of added specialty or add some Advantages to supercharge your other powers. The Roles system lets you alter your specialty even further. Starting off Balanced, you'll eventually earn Offensive, Defensive and Support roles by executing those roles effectively in combat. Toggling to the right role at the right time can help balance a party. Meanwhile, a skill discipline avenue allows you to specialize in Arms, Science, or Mysticism, to do stuff like hack security systems, create devices and upgrades, and banish spirits, respectively.

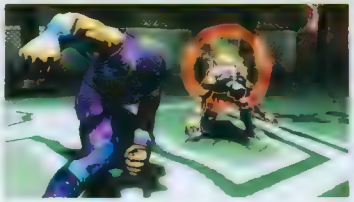
Cryptic welcomes new players to Champions Online with a host of early game exploits that provide a taste of each mission type. You'll experience the familiar, in delivery quests and highly-designed private instances (like the Lemuria Crisis Zone, an impressive undersea kingdom); and the new, such as Open Missions that players can participate in, earning performance ratings and rewards. Think Public Quests from Warhammer Online. The noble Rescue missions have you pulling the fallen out from rubble, defending the innocent against hordes of foes as an evacuation chopper arrives, and liberating hostages from a villain's base. And sometimes you'll simply run into a situation in the world that becomes a mission when you intercede.

Every superhero needs his or her own personal nemesis, however. In a brilliant stroke of user-generated goodness, mid-level players will gain access to a Nemesis creator, using all the same tools one uses to assemble a hero and additional options for tendencies and minions. Once introduced to the world, you rarely know where or when Cryptic's clever algorithms will spawn your Nemesis, but rest assured that it's out there waiting for you. Eventually you'll receive missions to hunt your Nemesis and foil their plans in instanced challenges.

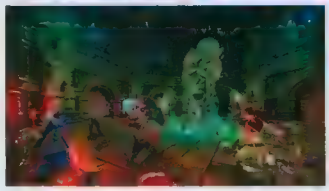
Perhaps you won't need that NPC nemesis, because you're too busy clubbing your workmates. Champions Online will launch with a few interesting PVP opportunities. You can challenge another player to a straight up 1-on-1 duel, a great way to test character builds and settle disputes, or take part in B.A.S.H., a 24/7 free-for-all PVP slaughter. A more tactical team match-up can be played in the Tournament of Champions, and a robust scenario-based PVP game can be experienced in the Apocalypse mode. Battling in these instanced PVP areas will build currency to spend on unique PVP rewards.

A word or two about the presentation in Cryptic's proprietary engine. First, let's address that comic-inspired outlining effect. It can be toggled on and off, and I did a lot of experimenting before coming to the conclusion that I might play without it. It looks fairly cool on these excellent character models, yet I started to prefer much of the world without it—especially while bolting across the lovely Millennium City with super jumps, rocket boots and ice slides. The outlining does excel in some locations, however, adding an attractive *pop* to bank and warehouse interiors. It's a pretty subjective call. Overall, Champions Online is a good-looking game dressed in a stylized and saturated visual theme that thrives under strong shader and particle systems. Whether you're deep inside a cavernous dungeon or flying across the bright tropical heil known as Monster Island, it's an attractive and varied comic book world bolstered by entertaining cinematics and cool tunes. The modern horsepower also enables plenty of interactive debris, like boulders to punt and barrels and cars to toss.

There's always that question of whether a new MMO title can find and sustain an audience. Champions Online isn't really competing with the popular fantasy trio, WoW, Warhammer and Conan. Nor does it seek to invade the space of sci-fi MMOs. I predict many City of X players will migrate over. The remaining superhero game fans will be scratching their heads, debating the merits of Champions Online vs. DC Universe Online. A debate we'll pick up in a future issue.



Allods:
Gala-Net's prized Russian gem



Sunnyvale, California's Gala-Net, one of the most successful purveyors of free-to-play online games, has secured the North and Central American publishing rights to Allods Online, the single largest Russian game development project to date. Clinching the Best Online Game and Best Game Developer awards at the 2008 Russian GDC, this huge $12 million USD production is currently taking Russia by storm and gearing up for Asian territory deployment.

The pseudo-sequel to the original Allods single-player RPG released over a decade ago (better known as Rage of Mages in the US), Allods Online is Nival Online's first major in-house effort. Nival Online is a member of the Astrum Online Entertainment empire, a company that holds over a 60% share of the online games market in Russia. Hence the healthy funding. The core developers on the NO team were previously responsible for the Ubisoft-published Heroes of Might and Magic V, tasked with leveraging their strategic RPG experience in an all-new MMORPG. The mandate: redefine perceptions by creating the highest quality MMO the free-to-play market has ever seen, backed by a level of investment akin to AAA console development or a small Hollywood film.

The Allods Online universe features a Skies of Arcadia-like fantasy world, with a series of large floating islands and the commonality of airship travel (and combat) between its various occupants. As with any successful MMO, two player factions are pitted against each other. Players can explore the islands of their home team with extensive discovery quests, encountering the likes of shadowknights, ogres and clans of lycanthropes, or operate stealth raids onto hostile islands to sting the enemy and seek out elven relics. Airship combat features prominently across the skies and astral horizons of Allods Online, and the cannon-blasting titans can hold up to 25 players, requiring some frenzied crew management for would-be captains. These ship battles aren't limited to human foes; boss battles against huge astral demons will be fought with all hands on deck.

Many will see the interface and art style of Allods Online, its relative complexity and chosen palettes, and draw comparisons to World of Warcraft. Hey, if you're spending $12 million on an online RPG in Russia (with global markets in mind), it's probably not a bad idea to pull inspiration from the most familiar MMORPG on the planet. The Allods formula appears to be unique enough to stand on its own, however, with generously-funded production values that soar past the typical free-to-play title. Chiming in on the deal, Gala-Net's CEO Jikhan Jung stated: "Allods will be proof that the free-to-play business model is the future of all western AAA online games." We shall see later this year.

"Airship combat features prominently across the skies and astral horizons..."

Released By: Bandai | **Studio:** Sunrise | **Runtime:** 225 minutes | **Available:** June

Code Geass
Lelouch of the Rebellion

High and low...

Heather Anne Campbell

Code Geass is what you get when you reimagine the popularity of Death Note with the slaying power of Tsubasa Chronicle. It's the anime's anime. It features a young, posh boy with a relentless vigilante streak who wields brainwashing magical powers and pilots a giant robot in an international war ... all while coolly resisting the sexual advances of every woman he knows. Sunrise combines Clamp character designs and Gundam concepts into a bright, high-school action/drama that pits friend against friend. It's a Michael Bay film rendered in an anime palette; it's got something for everybody, unless that somebody wants subtlety.

It appeals to us, to otaku, because it's not only a revenge fantasy, but also a story that places the blame on the generation that came before us. Code Geass takes a look at the foreign policies, the market crashes, the mucked-up educations, rights, and religions of our contemporary world, and doesn't just say "Yes We Can," but rather, "Yes, I Must. No Matter What the Cost." It's angry, childish, and silly ... but it satisfies the parts of us that are hungry for change.

The show is rich with alternate-universe back-story, and though the politics are painted in broad and unapologetic strokes, we forgive the creators. After all, this is what anime does best—messy metaphors and questionable morals. In the year 2010, the Holy Empire of Britannia conquers Japan, by employing radically advanced giant robot technology. Called Knightmare Frames, these bipedal robots assault with such force that the country gives way in less than a month. Japan is re-designated Area 11, and the Japanese people are stripped of their rights and identities.

This doesn't mean that everyone in Britannia is an obedient follower of the country's line. The dashing prince of Britannia, Lelouch Lamperouge, for one, does not believe in the corrupt motives of his empire. Scarred by the death of his mother, and fixated on the crippling attack suffered by his sister, he vows to destroy the kingdom of his throne. He is aided by a mysterious, immortal girl named C.C., who gives him the power to command men for the price of a dark favor in return.

Lelouch takes on the identity of Zero, a figurehead who seeks to create a new, independent nation of Japan ... and leads a group of terrorists towards liberation. His best friend, Suzaku Kururugi, is a Japanese soldier in the service of Britannia, and the two cross swords in their efforts to achieve justice. Suzaku hates Zero, but loves Lelouch. And as principled as the two may be, Lelouch's failures come faster, as his true motives are sullied by a lust for vengeance and thirst for power. Inevitably, the rewards of his triumphs are tainted by the poisons of his past.

> "Code Geass may be made in Japan, but its message is clearly aimed at America."

Code Geass may be made in Japan, but its message is clearly aimed at America. It's a fable about imperialism that gives its audience an easy outlet for immature terrorist fantasies. It's playground pretend that lunges at loftier ideas, but even a superficial deconstruction of Geass reveals too many mixed messages, too many empty analogies. It's best taken as entertainment, the metaphors ignored for the flashes of action and the indiscreet sexuality. Women are eager objects, men are flawed kings, and children dictate the outcomes of nations.

parting shot

Code Geass moves forward and remains novel, even as it's pulled from a collage of unoriginal ideas. This is what anime does best—loud, incautious entertainment that delights in its own immaturity.

Gankutsuou:
The Count of Monte Cristo Box Set

The *other* French anime

Gankutsuou is no Le Chevalier D'Eon. No, this remake of Dumas' pot-boiler The Count of Monte Cristo is a far different animal…and some might even argue, a better one. No question its visual style packs an eye-bleeding punch—by the time you've watched several episodes in a row, you'll start to see strange patterns and colors moving in the real world too. But what Monte Cristo does better than Le Chev is tell a fascinating, tightly plotted story, mainly because it doesn't stray too far from the source material until the later episodes, whereas Le Chev has to make you work harder to care about its characters. I love Le Chev, don't get me wrong, but let's give credit where it's due.

For the uninitiated, Monte Cristo is the ultimate revenge tale, where Edmond Dantes returns after decades to wreak his vengeance as the mysterious Count of Monte Cristo. The anime picks up the story *in medias res*, on the night of the carnival. And, as it is customary for any anime, it puts the story in space in the far future, instead of in 19th Century Paris. Here, the Count seems more vampiric—far less of a sympathetic figure than an antagonistic one. The anime also dials up the action, with swordfights, betrayals, and derring-do set against the framework of the Count's master plan.

But it's the visual style that'll linger with you longest. Unique among anime, Gankutsuou's animation is like nothing you've seen before or since. Watch it for the novelty of the animation, and you'll find yourself stuck on the series because of excellent plot and pacing **Bill Gray**

parting shot

Come along with the count for a dark and wild ride that you (and your eyes) will remember for a long time.

Last Exile
The Complete Series

Flying Colors

I missed the boat (airship?) the first time Last Exile came flying around Yet another fine series thought to be lost in the Geneon implosion, the series first aired waaaaaay back in 2004 on the now-defunct Anime Unleashed anime block. With some breathtaking flight and fight sequences and a fine mix of CGI and hand drawn cells, the series certainly deserved better—so it's a relief to see that FUNi picked it up for thinpak release.

Klaus and Lavie, two young vanship pilots, serve as couriers in the steampunk world of Prester. Despite their youth, the duo are some of the best in the business, delivering messages and competing in races to make ends meet. The courier life is a dangerous one, as two warring nations, the noble Anatoray and the mysterious Disith, periodically send huge fleets of capital ships into battle against each other, all under the watchful eye of an organization known simply as "The Guild." When a chance encounter with a dying fellow courier leads them to carry out their most difficult mission ever, the two pilots trigger events that have world-changing ramifications.

While it's no Porco Rosso—Miyazaki's fine homage to bi-plane racing—Last Exile manages to entertain, particularly in the CGI/animated battles between capital ships, and the racing sequences. The show uses an appropriately muted, somber color palette—but the animation, particularly in later episodes, suffers from "GONZO-itis," i.e. it gets terribly uneven. Despite this shortcoming, the fascinating setting and awesome score will keep you with the show until its complex plot and characters can take you the rest of the way home. **Bill Gray**

"Last Exile manages to entertain, particularly in the CGI/animated battles…"

parting shot

A steampunk aerial combat series that's worthy of a roundtrip ticket.

Released By: FUNimation | **Studio:** A-1 Pictures | **Eps:** 7 | **Avail:** August 18

Big Windup!

Season 1, Part 1

Take me out to the ballgame

Baseball anime? Seriously, baseball anime, Dave? I couldn't believe it when I opened up the package from FUNimation and saw a preview disc for Big Windup! sitting there. *There's no way*, I thought to myself. *This isn't the stuff we usually cover in Play*. But I decided to give it a shot—after all, it couldn't be much worse than say, Green Green or some other fanservice shell of a show. Baseball anime...and after watching it, I can't wait until FUNi brings over the next seven episodes.

Yeah, you heard me right. I popped this little baby in around 11:30 p.m. at night... and I couldn't turn away. Granted, the main character Ren is probably the wussiest wuss that ever wussed in an anime, and that's saying something. You see, Ren's a pitcher for his junior high team, but his teammates believe he only got the job because his grandfather owned the school. So they give him all of the crap you or I used to get in junior high, only times ten because they didn't win a single game in three years. Embarrassed and defeated, Ren transfers to a new high school and joins a startup team. As they barely have enough players to field a team, Ren finds himself in his old pitcher's role—only this time with teammates who believe in him. And he finds he's a lot better pitcher than he thought he was.

I've been mulling over what roped me into this story. I think it's the purity of the story—there are no side characters, no romantic interests, no teachers, just baseball. And it's baseball that's broken down into its components, revealing a serious love of the game on the part of A-1 Pictures and especially the series creator, Asa Higuchi. Couple that with an appealing underdog story and some genuinely tense games, and you have the makings of a fine season. Baseball anime <shakes head>. **Bill Gray**

parting shot

Anime's the place to try unusual things, right? Like baseball anime. Give this one a shot, and you might find yourself as sucked in as I was. Just try to ignore all of Ren's whining.

KAZE NO STIGMA
VOLUME 1 - WIND
BLOWING INTO STORES ON
JULY 7th
FUNIMATION.COM/KAZENOSTIGMA
FUNIMATION
© 2007 Hotaka Yamato • Nanatsuki Ikeda/FUJIMI SHOBO • Stigma of the wind Partners. Licensed by FUNimation® Productions, Ltd.

Wandering Ginza Butterfly and Wandering Ginza Butterfly 2: She Cat Gambler

Studio: Synapse

Meiko Kaji, the enigmatic star of such '70s Japanese action/exploitation titles as *Lady Snowblood* and the *Female Convict Scorpion* and *Stray Cat Rock* series, cements her iconic presence with this gritty two-fer that casts her as a roaming ex-con who settles scores with her sword and icy stare. *Ginza Butterfly* establishes her back-story – Nami is a former gang member with years of hard time for murder behind her, and who wants nothing but to establish a normal life. Trouble rears its head in the form of a mobster who wants to muscle in on her new gig at a billiard hall, forcing Nami to put down the cue stick and once again pick up the sword. *She-Cat Gambler* adds a quicker pace and Sonny (Vival) Chiba as a lethal sidekick in her fight against the man who killed her father. Both pictures, directed by Kazuhiko Yamaguchi (who later helmed several Chiba titles, as well as the *Sister Street Fighter* series), are ripe with style and verve, from the brassy score down to the ruthless final showdowns, with *She-Cat*'s the ballsier of the two thanks to Chiba's loopy performance. Both DVDs include interviews with Yamaguchi, while the first *Butterfly* features an informative commentary track by movie scholar Chris D. **Paul Gaita**

A Bug's Life

Studio: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment

There aren't many misses in Pixar's generally stellar track record, but A Bug's Life is one of them. The studio's second feature, it's a featherweight adventure at best that suffers from many of the same problems as other studios' knockoffs, even if its just-released Blu-ray offers a gold standard by which virtually all animated home video releases should be measured.

Following the adventures of a well-intentioned misfit named Flik, A Bug's Life relies too heavily on coincidence and misunderstanding to drive its already too-conventional plot, making the film's messages feel, well, cartoonish. Thankfully, however, the Blu-ray is stacked with substantive extras, including a new filmmaker roundtable, and a reading of the original story idea. But ultimately, A Bug's Life is at best a stopgap release that really just reminds us what we have to look forward to, even if its presentation otherwise makes the most of what we're actually seeing. **Todd Gilchrist**

Children of Men

Studio: Universal Studios Home Entertainment

Alfonso Cuaron's Children of Men is, like Blade Runner or Shawshank Redemption before it, a film that few saw in theaters, but everyone loves. Thankfully, its new release offers more than enough extra goodies to make the tenth viewing seem like the first, and the first to seem huge and cinematic, even on the small screen. Starring Clive Owen as the reluctant guardian of a pregnant girl in a future where humankind has become mysteriously infertile, the film manages to operate effectively as a sci-fi thriller, character study and parable. The Blu-ray, meanwhile, delves both into its conceptual underpinnings and its technical challenges, examining both its acrobatic camerawork and sociological implications with equal detail. But the best thing about this release is that whether you want just to watch the movie itself or wander through its world, you can thoroughly enjoy and explore Children of Men, over and over again. **Todd Gilchrist**

Freebie and the Bean

Studio: Warner Bros. Home Entertainment

Before buddy cop movies were boilerplate blockbusters, there was Freebie and the Bean. Starring Alan Arkin and James Caan as two detectives "protecting" a mob boss for later prosecution, director Richard Rush's 1974 romp is a manic, racist, often incomprehensible and yet utterly brilliant film that is long overdue for release on DVD. Between Caan's greased palms (as "Freebie") and Arkin's "Latin" temper (hence "The Bean"), the film indulges a mishmash of clichés, some not yet established and others thankfully discarded. Rush's kitchen-sink approach to directing every scene exhilarates as much as it offends as he veers between breakneck chases and screwball showdowns. Meanwhile, the bare-bones release via Warner Archives' DVD-on-demand program offers no bonus materials, save for an equally nonsensical theatrical trailer. But it's precisely this sort of limited-access, passing familiarity release that earns forgotten films cult classic status—which Freebie and the Bean genuinely deserves. **Todd Gilchrist**

Killshot

Studio: Weinstein Company

This uneven suspense picture, based on a novel by Elmore Leonard, might've been Mickey Rourke's comeback vehicle had it been released to theaters in 2005, as originally planned by producer Lawrence Bender. Endless studio tweaks and reshuffling, as well as Rourke's Oscar-nominated turn in *The Wrestler*, have effectively blunted its impact, but his performance as a half-Native American hit man forced out of retirement by his hot-wired partner (an overbaked Joseph Gordon-Levitt) and the in-hot-water couple (Diane Lane and Thomas Jane) who identify them, remains eminently kinetic and watchable. The hamfisted editing blunts the film's high point—Rourke's gunpowder-streaked appreciation for Lane's gumption—but the sheer quality of the cast (which includes Rosario Dawson) and a respectable attempt to evoke the morally grey tone of '70s noir make the final product worth a look-see. **Paul Gaita**

Eden Log

Studio: Magnolia Home Ent

Dark (both visually and thematically) dystopian science fiction from France about an amnesiac man (Clovis Cornillac) who awakens in an abandoned laboratory with a dead man by his side and no clue as to how he arrived there. Slowly, he begins to piece together where he is—a utopian settlement of sorts called Eden Log, now in ruins and overrun by humanoid creatures and the roots of a ferocious tree. What ensues is less of a survival game, as depicted in the high-energy American trailer, than a pensive exploration of the world of Eden Log, which, as depicted by director Franck Vestiel, is among the most elaborate and impressive in recent fantasy films. Those requiring more bang for their buck will probably find the ruminations on identity and focus on atmosphere and design somewhat trying, but others, especially those entranced by meta-sci-fi like *Cube*, will find this a fascinating puzzle worth the untangling. **Paul Gaita**

Star Trek: Original Motion Picture Collection

Studio: Paramount

Including the first six feature films and over 14 hours of bonus materials, the new seven-disc Original Motion Picture Collection outwardly seems like an embarrassment of riches for virtually any Star Trek fan. But Paramount has sacrificed quality for quantity in their rush to capitalize on the success of J.J. Abrams' reboot, offering an expansive but incomplete set that will have collectors hanging on to their old DVDs even after picking it up.

While the set provides remastered versions of all of the films, it offers only the theatrical cut of Star Treks 1 and 2, which means that the beefed-up effects on The Motion Picture are completely absent. At the same time, all of the films feature new commentary tracks by fans, filmmakers or Trek experts, but these tracks appear to have been added instead of the original ones, or to replace the invaluable text commentaries on the original DVDs that made the films' few boring moments endurable. But even with its modest qualitative upgrades and dubious substitutions, there's no denying that the presentation surpasses that of all previous releases—which makes The Original Motion Picture Collection an essential addition, but sadly not a completion, to anyone's Trek collection. **Todd Gilchrist**

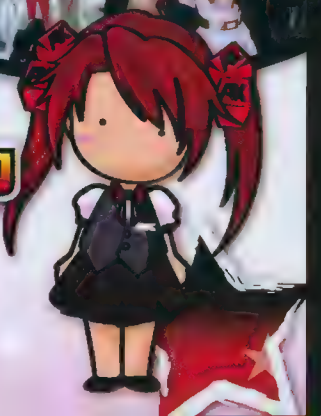
ANIMEEXPO AX 2009

July 2-5

Los Angeles
Convention Center

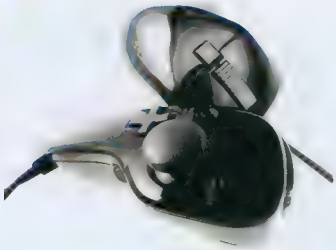
REGISTER NOW &
JOIN THE FUN!

Pre-Register Now at:
www.anime-expo.org



Society for the Promotion of Japanese Animation

The Shop



FragFX v.2

Splitfish Gameware

On the test bed: Version 2 of the FragFX, a controller-and-mouse hybrid designed by Splitfish for PlayStation 3. Installing the FragFX v.2 is a breeze. Plug it into one of your PS3's USB ports, press the PS button on the left hand grip, and off you go. To the games!

Console shooters each employ slightly different camera dampening and sticky targeting techniques, so plenty of trial and error is required, else the FragFX may leave a sluggish impression. One of its own dampening features is the Frag button, an on-demand slow down of mouse travel speed that lets one quickly squeeze-out a few precise shots. The recent Riddick sequel was an introduction to the rigorous per game options tweaking required when using this peripheral, though it worked fairly well. It feels good to have stuff like jump, duck and melee available with absolutely no interruptions to camera control.

Next we pulled out to a third-person view in the excellent open world blockbuster, inFamous. Defying expectations, this game plays rather well through the v.2. Good camera response (again, the speed dial at its maximum) makes for quick zap attacks, and having essential face buttons on your right thumb feels natural as you move the mouse to look around for Cole's next big leap.

We returned to first-person for a run in Killzone 2, where you'll have to audition a few of the game's available controller configs. Clicking the large middle button on the FragFX's mouse is like pushing the right stick (R3), so we selected a config that placed weapon zoom here, similar to traditional iron sights in a PC shooter.

The FragFX v.2 includes full Six Axis circuitry in the left grip, and in an interesting twist Splitfish allows you to program any button to a Six Axis command. So you could map your melee attack button in Resistance 2 to "shake up," and presto: you have a crappy Wii control scheme! Seriously though, this is a neat little option to have. You can also use Swap mode to move left stick operation over to the mouse (for stuff like racing games), and Mouse mode for computer-like web browsing on the PS3.

Not nearly as unwieldy as we presumed (cords are manageable, mouse is pretty comfy), and often quite beneficial in games, the FragFX v.2 is nonetheless not a miracle controller replacement. It's a cleverly adapted PC gaming-like solution that excels in some titles, struggles with others, and requires plenty of user-dependent adjustment to fully exploit.

Health Potion

Harcos

It's summertime, and the living is easy. However, the partying is hard. When you need a quick, lasting jolt of energy to keep moving, raise your hitpoints with a renewing blast of Health Potion. From Harcos, the alchemists behind the Mana Potion, comes this skull-rattling red mix in a compact, golf ball-sized bottle. With Elderberry, Ginseng, Biotin, and Folic Acid, this hearty apple-cinnamon flavored wake-up call rushes two Red Bull's worth of caffeine into your system for five to eight hours of smooth energy. It's sugar-free and jitter-free, without the typical energy drink after crash. Health Potions can be looted in single, six and twelve-packs at Hot Topic, Micro Center, ThinkGeek.com and dozens of comic shops.

Make your summer a

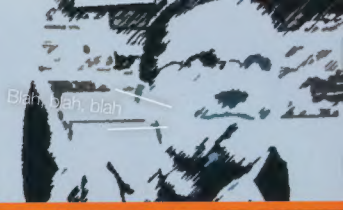
LITTLE WARMER

girls of gaming 7

With More 3D!
(glasses included)

Pre-book your copy today at

www.thegirlsofgaming.com



BACK OF THE BOOK

07_09 ERIC L. PATTERSON
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Dear Xbox 360,
Stay cool! Your BFF, Eric.

Logic tells me that, working for a publication like Play—where it is my job to talk about and give opinions on all facets of video gaming—I shouldn't pick favorites when it comes to gaming hardware. But, let's be honest here; we all play favorites in some way or another, and part of the reason you folks out there either love to love us (or love to hate us) Play folks is because we have opinions and we aren't afraid to state them.

I never wanted to like the original Xbox. When all of my friends owned one and were having a blast over Xbox Live, the temptation was there, but I fought as hard as I could to resist. You have to understand: after years of both being a hardcore Apple fanboy and a web designer (I want to rip your heart out and bury you in the deepest grave I can find, Internet Explorer), Microsoft was the bane of my existence. Now, not only did they want to get onto my desktop, but also next to my television set? I'd be damned if that's going to happen!

And yet, it did, and the truth was, the Xbox was a great little machine that took something I loved—online gaming—and treated it seriously. There was no chance of the Xbox replacing the uber-dominant PS2 in my heart, but damn if it didn't try to warm my chilly feelings towards the folks in Redmond.

Please understand; it isn't that I'm some crazy anti-Microsoft zealot who calls them "M$" at every opportunity or who loves listings all of the ways in which Windows Vista is "teh fail." It's just that, after years of them being the "enemy," it was hard for me to allow myself to turn around and trust them with my gaming likes and dislikes, you know?

> "I love that chubby white rectangle... but I don't want my PS3 or Wii to hear me say that and get jealous."

I like the Xbox 360. I might almost be tempted to say that I love that chubby white rectangle—even with my particular console dying twice now so far—but I don't want my PS3 or Wii to hear me say that and get jealous. Microsoft, in their second attempt, really got their ducks in a row, and not only greatly expanded their commitment to online gaming, but made a number of other small decisions that would end up giving them a huge leg-up over the competition. (For example—having only one division of the company responsible for approving new Xbox Live Arcade titles. Really folks, it's the year 2009; having different countries approve things differently and no connection when it comes to what is released where for a digital distribution service is inexcusable.)

Why I started to get into all of this is because, recently, two factors of the Xbox 360 really jumped out at me, and I came to realize how easy they are to take for granted, yet how utterly groundbreaking they are for a platform the size and scale of the Xbox 360, and how they show that Microsoft, while certainly wanting to own all of our living rooms, is also honestly committed to trying to push gaming forward.

Let me be a little too brutally honest here: I've not been all that impressed with most of the XNA games that I've played so far. And yet, for as long as the idea has been around, it hadn't truly sunk in just what XNA means for gaming until recently. Indie developers—as in, guys and gals in their garages—can now think up a game, design the game, make the game, and then publish the game to the Xbox Live Marketplace for the entire world to play and hopefully enjoy. That's, like, huge!

With Sony and Nintendo actively trying to keep homebrew off of their hardware (an especially big mistake when it comes to the PSP), Microsoft has created a legitimate way not just to make a game for their console, but then get it into the hands of others. Yes, it's a very PC mentality creeping into the console world, but in this case, it is one that I can absolutely support.

The other is Xbox Primetime. I recently had the chance to try the Canadian beta of 1 vs. 100, and I expected to go in and play some rounds of trivia and come away thinking it was a fun way to waste some time. What I instead found is that, to me, more than almost anything else this generation, Xbox Primetime is a true sign of making an effort to do something completely new. Scheduled video game programming only available at certain times is a crazy idea, but it builds the excitement of those chances when you can play. Then, once inside, you realize that you're actually taking part in a gameshow, where a live host talks you through different segments and, if you get chosen to be one of the lucky contestants, you can walk away with real money. Okay, fine, Microsoft Points; but never has a home trivia-based game actually had an outcome that mattered like it matters here.

Xbox Primetime is, totally serious here, not just a new game to play, but a new gaming experience. Even if you aren't the type to appreciate a title like 1 vs. 100, this is Microsoft attempting something that I cannot remember ever being tried before, and whaterver happens in the long run or not, I have a new-found respect for them for even trying such a thing.

I once feared your entry into video gaming, Microsoft, because I was concerned that you would just push for market domination without giving consideration to how the market was left in your wake. Now, I can say in all honesty that this market wouldn't be nearly as exciting nor as daring without you. Just, please, don't let me down.

2D High-Resolution Fighting Brilliance

Limited Edition Includes

- A two-disc original soundtrack containing 42 tracks by Guilty Gear's Daisuke Ishiwatari + remixes by DJ Oh no!
- Bonus Disc containing basic tutorials, expert advice, character-specific strategies, and much more!

Comprehensive Online Play

Replay theater, six-player lobbies, ranked matches, and more!

BLAZBLUE
CALAMITY TRIGGER

Dramatic Story Mode

Experience the fantastic story of BlazBlue through the eyes of each character.

TEEN T
Animated Blood
Language
Partial Nudity
Suggestive Themes
Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

PS3 PLAYSTATION 3
PlayStation Network
XBOX 360
XBOX LIVE
ARC SYSTEM WORKS
AKSYS GAMES

© 1998-2009 ARC SYSTEM WORKS Co.,Ltd. Published and distributed by Aksys Games with permission from ARC SYSTEM WORKS. The "PS" Family logo is a registered trademark and "PS3" is a trademark of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. The PlayStation Network Logo is a service mark of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. Microsoft, Xbox, Xbox 360, Xbox LIVE and the Xbox logos are trademarks of the Microsoft group of companies and are used under license from Microsoft. The ratings icon is a trademark of the Entertainment Software Association. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

http://dungeonfighter.nexon.net

PC ONLINE GAME

DUNGEON FIGHTER ONLINE

TAKE THE ARCADE FIGHT ONLINE!

NO SUBSCRIPTION FEES, EVER

NEXON | WE MAKE WONDER neople

© 2009 NEXON Corporation and NEXON America Inc. and Neople Inc., All Rights Reserved.

Made with love by

Our goal is to preserve classic video game magazines so that they are not lost permanently.

People interested in helping out in any capacity, please visit us at retromags.com.

No profit is made from these scans, nor do we offer anything available from the publishers themselves.

If you come across anyone selling releases from this site, please do not support them and do let us know.

Thank you!